THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

argosy

FEBRUARY

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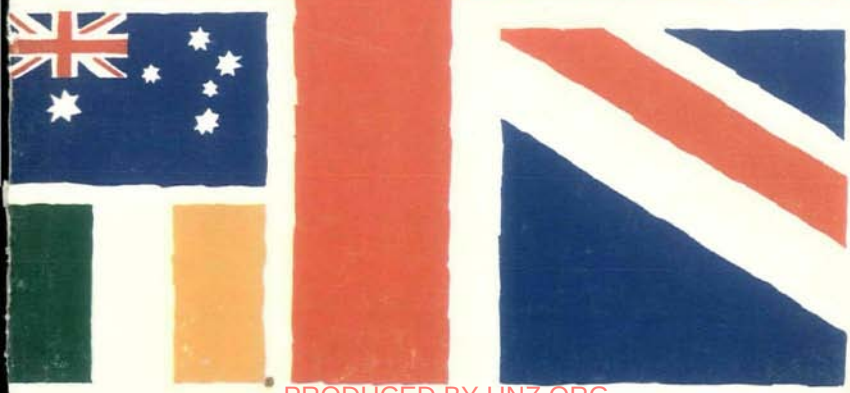

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Life is an OPERETTA

Volatile, irresistible, she drank
from the spangled cup of illusion

BY PETER USTINOV

IT was in the winter of 1927 that Mitzi's dream came true. The little girl from the outskirts of Kekesféhervar made her debut in an operetta written by the great Imre Dobos himself. Malicious tongues whispered that, in order to attain her ends, she had had to give herself to Dobos, and, unfortunately, as is so often the case, the malicious tongues were quite right. However, she sang prettily, caused Dobos' fourth divorce, and the score, fired no doubt by love and a blaze of sudden youth in the afternoon of life, was acclaimed a masterpiece of its kind.

Mitzi had always been attracted by operetta, and even in her school days she knew all the tunes and all the words of the current hits. Her first sweetheart, Lajos Palotai, was a mild, long-haired fellow, painfully myopic, whose tastes ran to more serious music; but to oblige his black-eyed paramour he hammered out the frivolous melodies on the upright piano. Together, on the banks of lustrous summer rivers, in small cafés, they fabricated her dream. She would be a great, great singer. His role in the dream was never quite clear, but he was too much in love and too timid to lay claim to any definite pigeonhole in her ambitions. He was flattered just to sit and listen and hold hands.

When she was eighteen, she went to Budapest.

Lajos saw her off at the station, without misgivings but with a jungle of sadness in his heart, which he tried manfully to disguise with awkward gallantry. The audition led to the four-poster bed in the Dobos villa, by way of a candle-lit restaurant with gypsies and a night ride in an open Hispano-Suiza.

Lajos came up for the première of *Caravan Love* and sat

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alone in a box which Mitzi had charmingly reserved for him. The story of the operetta was not marked by the shedding of any startlingly new light on the gypsy problem, nor did the music show signs of any but melodic gifts. In the first act, a wandering Romany band encamped unwittingly on the estate of a prince, who happened to be celebrating his betrothal by allowing his disreputable hussar friends to behave badly in the ancestral halls.

In the second act, the hussars went hunting and came across the gypsies. Their legitimate fury against people who don't live in castles stopped abruptly when the prince clapped eyes on the gypsy king's daughter, played by Mitzi. Against the background of a hummed czardas, he sang the aria *All Alone a Flower Bloom'd in Autumn*, which subsequently became a favourite encore piece for strident tenors the world over. Forgetting his own engagement to the Countess Etelka, a buxom blonde in white fur, he courted Mitzi with the relentless verve of a talented cavalry officer.

The gypsy king admonished his daughter, in a resonant bass voice. *Beware of the Love of Princes*, imploring her to go on wandering and making clothes pegs and to choose a mate from her own kind. When his arguments proved unconvincing, he locked her in her caravan.

By night, the prince, dressed in tatters with a gay bandeau around his head, crept into the encampment and serenaded his beloved with the celebrated *Schatzchen, My Heart Beats in Your Breast*. Here Mitzi really came into her own by answering him in the world-shaking hit *Your Voice Is like a Symphony*. It all ended happily with a variation on the Sabine women, a rhapsody to Hungarian integration, in which hussars carried joyously struggling gypsy maidens in their arms, while the grimly conservative king of the *Zingari* found himself swept by the pervading mood of amatory abandon on to the heaving bosom of the Countess Etelka.

The applause was rapturous, and it was a trembling, tearful Lajos who clutched Mitzi's hands in the flower-filled dressing-room afterwards. He was a little disconcerted by the fact that they could not dine together, but she had a prior commitment with the great Dobos ("Business, you understand, my heart's darling"). Still, he said he understood, which wasn't true, but he was the type to say so.

He saw little of her for the next week, since Dobos seemed to have an incredible amount of business to transact. After ten days the situation was further complicated, not by a hardening in Lajos' attitude or by an increase in her lover's attentions, but

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by the fact that she suddenly fell in love with Ferenc Ferencsi, the high tenor playing the part of the prince in the operetta. She was not the kind of woman who could be serenaded and kissed every night without allowing it to affect her.

Dobos was livid, since he was both very important and no longer young. "Damned ingratitude!" he snorted, and allowed the echo of his *cri de cœur* to ricochet off every coffee-house wall in Budapest. Lajos felt for him.

One evening soon afterwards, the young and dissolute Prince Szent-Mihaly sent an enormous bouquet of flowers to the stage door. It was followed the next night by one even larger. The inevitable ensued; more violins, a convenient moon, yet another hectic night ride—this time in an open carriage with a coat of arms on the door and a couple of bored dragoons galloping alongside—and a huge, creaking bed in which generations of Szent-Mihalys had died, made love, and been born.

Ferencsi began to sing very flat in his depression, sharp in moments of anger. Both Lajos and Dobos felt for him. After a while, however, Prince Szent-Mihaly was severely reprimanded by his mother and dispatched to Monte Carlo as a punishment. It was at this very moment that Dobos chose to be intoxicated by the beauty of another girl he had auditioned, and he declared to the press that he had discovered the voice of the century. The double humiliation was too much for Mitzi to bear. In an orgy of contrition, she confessed all to Lajos; they held hands again.

Life, she reflected, is like that. What she meant was that life is like an operetta. The sophistication of an elderly roué's love, the wit and sparkle of his crooned conversation, the popping of champagne corks, the giggles charged with the hysteria of desire as the waxed moustache of a prince tickled her naked shoulder, the heart intent on imminent surrender being led through the caverns of sensuality by the feverish strains of a tearful violin—did it all lead to happiness, to fulfilment? No, no, and no again. True love was to be found at the end of Act Three, in poverty, wrapped in the stained frock of a struggling music teacher, old faithful, who had stood by and suffered in silence while she, the volatile, irresistible fly-by-night, had drunk deeply from the spangled cup of illusion.

No sooner had she felt this profound sense of purification than she began to find the inarticulate, indecisive Lajos distinctly boring. He had served his purpose for the moment. She had blurted out her confession, and he had just smiled through his tears as though a prodigal spirit were returning to the fold. Her conscience was clear again.

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The Budapest triumph was repeated in Vienna, but with an Austrian tenor with whom she fell in love because it was part of the plot. She also captivated the notorious modernist composer, Manfred von Ilch, who wrote to a thirteen-tone ladder of his own invention, thereby exciting the implacable hatred of those who were religiously addicted to a ladder of merely twelve tones. With the pathetic lack of discrimination shown by most great men when they fall in love, the otherwise unswerving Dr. von Ilch decided that Mitzi had exactly the right timbre for his troubled muse and wrote expressly for her his fragmentary *Vier Grausame Lieder* ("Four Cruel Songs"), based on the chants of medieval flagellants and scored for female *sprechstimme*, electric guitar deliberately distorted by low voltage, cheese grater, castanets, and four whips of different sizes.

The only performance of the work was a disaster, since Mitzi, once confronted by an audience, could not resist imposing a most ingratiating expression on her face, and consequently this penetrating adventure into the gloomy fathoms of human subconsciousness became instead merely comical, a comment on itself from some *avant-garde* revue. The more the audience tittered, the more coy Mitzi became, and soon afterwards Dr. von Ilch took his life, leaving nothing but an enigmatic letter in Latin.

Once more the prey of a deliciously tragic feeling of guilt, Mitzi summoned Lajos to Vienna. She told him she was desperately alone, which was a feeling she always had when an attachment had just ended and before she had had time to establish another one. The long-suffering Lajos looked deep into her eyes and said to her, "Mitzi, one day you will realise my worth. You smile now, because you are kind. But one day there will be no-one—the princes, the composers, the tenors, they will all have gone. Then you will stir the pot of memory, searching for someone to whom you can turn. Suddenly your face will light up. You will call my name, and it will be for ever."

"It is for ever now," she said, her eyes wide and innocent, as though she had been unaccountably misunderstood.

"I believe you," he lied, tears of emotion forming in his eyes, "and I will stay with you, abandoning the little class I was building up in Budapest."

"Class? What class?" She became coquettish. "I never did know what you did in your spare time. I was absurdly jealous. What class?"

"Piano and Theory."

"How interesting."

"You're not serious."

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Mitzi flashed. "I'll show you how serious I am tomorrow. We will dine together at Sacher's after the theatre, and we will make plans, huge plans, as we did in the old days."

When Lajos arrived at the restaurant, he saw Mitzi dining with an elderly gentleman. He retired in confusion to the foyer and wrote a note reminding her of their date. Nervously he gave it to a waiter and sat down to wait developments. After a seeming eternity, the waiter returned with a card, on which was written:

Dearest friend,

I tried to reach you everywhere, without success. *Not* tonight, my Lajos, not *this week*. I am with Mr. Nate Schiffnick of *New York*. May be most important for *both of us*.

Your *little* goose,
MITZI

Lajos left the restaurant sick at heart.

Caravan Love opened in New York late in 1931, presented by Wyant and Schiffnick and starring Mitzi and Diego de la Luna, a silent star who had drifted into musical comedy when it was discovered that his speaking voice was impossibly high for the villainous roles he was cast in, although his soaring lyric singing voice fitted him admirably for the part of the prince on Broadway. By the time the heroic Lajos arrived in the United States on the Hungarian quota, Mitzi had not only triumphed in the operetta but had also had her affair with Diego de la Luna. In their transports of passion, he had murmured in Spanish while she had shrieked in Hungarian, since their mutual knowledge of English was quite inadequate for the purpose of communication.

Lajos arrived at the theatre on his first evening in America and was told that Miss Mitzi Somlos could receive no visitors. When he tried to buy a ticket at the box office, he was told that there were none, and if there were, they would cost the earth. Without the means of bribery, he loitered miserably around the building until the performance was over and then stood by the stage door with a couple of neurotic autograph hunters who had staring, imbecile eyes and who talked to themselves.

One by one the other actors emerged, interspersed with members of the orchestra carrying their instruments. Eventually Mitzi came out, drowned in expensive sables, drenched in a mist of perfume, on the arm of elderly, sallow Mr. Schiffnick, who wore

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tails. For a moment Mitzi's eyes met those of Lajos, and she looked away quickly, more irritated than surprised, and bent low to step into the limousine which was to carry her and her bald prince charming to an evening of delight.

The very next day, at a quiet reception of some four hundred guests, Mitzi and Nate Schiffnick were married on the roof of a fashionable hotel. Everything was done in the best of taste and with that commendable restraint which marked all Mr. Schiffnick's artistic ventures. An organ was played by a lady in top hat and tails but little else. The lights in the organ changed colour according to the mood of the service. A cake in the shape of Mitzi was wheeled in, and Mr. Schiffnick cut it, permitting himself lewd but friendly remarks to his many acquaintances with every incision of the knife.

That night Lajos was at the stage door again, and he managed to say the word "Mitzi" as she emerged on to the pavement. This time she did not ignore him. She looked at him with the greatest coldness and annoyance. "You understand nothing. Nothing," she said.

Lajos trembled with an anger he had never felt before. "I understand what you do not!" he cried. "Life is not an operetta. It cannot be lived as though it were!"

"Is this man annoying you, honey?" asked Mr. Schniffnick.

"Yes."

"Burger!"

The stage door man appeared and passed a menacing remark.

"Remember," shouted the retreating Lajos, "you will suffer more than I! Goodbye, for ever!"

Two weeks later, as the direct result of recklessly attempting to live the life of a younger man, Mr. Schiffnick died. His funeral, arranged by his erstwhile partner, Mr. Wyant, was as majestic as his marriage had been devout. The music of his greatest hits was played by a huge orchestra throughout the service. Mr. Wyant did his old pal proud. When the will was read, however, it was discovered, to the general surprise and to Mitzi's horror, that he had left nothing but debts. Schiffnick had been a spendthrift, a man excited by dangerous living from day to day, and a bit of a crook. Those closest to him were all agreed that he died just in time to escape the massive retribution which had been building up over the years to strike him. Some people even began to call him "Lucky Nate Schiffnick" after his death.

Mitzi dressed from head to foot in black and wept frequently, as though to convince herself that her marriage to the man who had seemed to have been fashioned from yellowed ivory in both

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life and death had been the inevitable result of true love. Although she would never admit it, she always thought of her father's death when tears were called for. People were suspecting that she was a better actress off the stage than on.

The first flush of success began to fade, and soon *Caravan Love* was tottering along on the very brink of loss. The Budapest papers, which Mitzi's brother sent her, spoke of her great success in the New World. She was quickly caught between reality and legend. It was impossible for her to return now. As soon as the New York run ended, she went out on the road and milked the property until there was no more life left in it. She still dressed in mourning out of reverence for the man she hardly knew.

Soon she was haunting the agents' offices, but gypsy maidens were no longer an everyday necessity, and her command of the English language remained doggedly unimproved. Money ran short, and her past love of goulash and *Sachertorte* began to take its toll. By the day she grew stouter, stockier. Men no longer fell for her. She fell for them, and in the chase she frightened them by her determined brightness, her brittle peals of artificial laughter, her languorous airs of fatal love, which seemed to be based on techniques rejected by Mata Hari as old-fashioned. She thought of suicide, not seriously but romantically.

One night, while she was sitting dejectedly in her one-room apartment, there was a knock on the door. It could only be a creditor, she told herself. At the third knock, she tiptoed to the switch and turned off the lights. No use. The knocking continued. Preparing some choice invective, she flung open the door.

"Lajos!"

She hid her face. "Don't look at me. I am old and ugly."

"You are twenty-nine," said Lajos, "and more beautiful than ever."

"Where have you been? And how did you find me?"

"I always knew where you were. Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus. I even knew that your marriage wouldn't last. I didn't guess that the end would be so abrupt, so terrible, but I knew something would happen."

"How did you know?" she asked mysteriously, since she had a predilection for the occult, perhaps because she had depicted a gypsy for so long.

"I knew, because there is justice in this world," he replied magnificently, "and because I was waiting."

Heartened by his show of generosity, she could afford herself

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a little bitterness. "You know he left not a penny. He was not much to look at, but he had a heart of gold."

"But why, why, did you marry him?"

This was what Mitzi had been waiting for, the question which provoked all her frustrated theatrical talents.

"Because I was a fool," she hooted, "a fool. Like a butterfly, I was drawn to the flame. I was a little Magyar Cinderella dazzled by the brightness of the ball, and I lived my dream to the full!"

For the next hour, Lajos could not manage to say a word, so torrential was the storm of conventional images which blasted his eardrums. She postured, she hid her face, only to reveal it again more dramatically, she played her version of *Camille* to a crowded gallery, she sang a few snatches in a carefully broken voice, she threw herself on a divan, rolled on to the floor in an act of nun-like self-mortification, then rose violently to her feet and defied the world, her mascara running down her face like the reflection of prison bars. At length, even her energy attained its limits, and she sat heaving on a kitchen chair, the hair on her forehead matted with perspiration, her buxom frame rocked with uncontrollable nervous spasms.

"Marry me," said Lajos.

She held out a hand which was prematurely blue veined, like an old lady's. "Dearest boy," she murmured.

Lajos rose and spoke in a pallid voice.

"I work as music critic on the Hungarian weekly paper."

"You can't live on that."

He stammered, "I also wash dishes at the Come-n-Gettit Steak House."

The tears welled into her dark eyes again.

Embarrassed, he added, "I have written out my address if you should need me." And, placing a piece of paper on the table, he left.

She stared after him vacantly, then gazed into the mirror. Quickly she tidied herself up, replaced the powder, the rouge, the mascara, the lipstick, and then examined herself with a look of enigmatic fascination.

"I am not old enough to marry Lajos," she reflected.

Her road downhill was the more painful for being gradual. When money ran out, she took a job teaching Hungarian at a language school, but although her knowledge of Hungarian was adequate, her knowledge of English was not, and her pupils made no headway. Eventually she struggled on as an independent seamstress, coping with the overflow from other, recognised

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firms of clothiers. She called herself Mrs. Mary Schiffnick, since she maintained proudly that the name of Mitzi Somlos would be associated only with glory.

Lajós visited her about once a week and never failed to renew his proposal. There was something desperate about his restraint, something almost mad in his insistence. Time passed, and with it grew the bitterness. War was declared, but Mitzi had not yet brought herself to make a decision as momentous. She still went to auditions, calling herself Mary Schiffnick, dressing more and eccentrically in clothes she made herself, but it didn't help. She tried the names of Mary Buda, Maritza Liszt, and Marimka Czardas, but there was no magic in these sobriquets.

To humour Lajos, she used to say that they were more married than not, since neither had any other temptations. As far as he was concerned, she was right; but her eyes had acquired the habit of dropping suggestive hints left and right, a habit she regarded as indispensable to her calling. Never mind if her indiscriminate flirtation was becoming more and more pathetic; there was nothing about it to console Lajos, who had suffered too severely to be entirely rational in his appraisal.

During the war, Mitzi became curiously patriotic and wept copiously at the thought of her "poor country" at the mercy of "those Germans." To listen to her, one might think that she was a deposed empress bemoaning the loss of her estates and her tiaras.

"The younger generation will never know the life we led," she used to pontificate sourly, "—the hussars with their brilliant shakos, their fur-trimmed jackets thrown carelessly over one shoulder, their gallantry—ah, the compliments that used to flow! At the end of some princely banquet, they would ride their white horses down the long tables, missing the bottles of Tokay with such elegance, such elegance!"

There was nothing in this description of life at home which Lajos recognised. The truth of the matter was that Mitzi had taken to the bottle, since reality was too bleak for her, and in her cups she lived in the lilting world of musical comedy. On one occasion Lajos permitted himself to lose his temper and shouted at her, "I told you once before, and I tell you now, life is not an operetta!"

He slammed the door, only to have the mortification of hearing her drunken voice embark on the sugared strains of *Your Voice Is Like a Symphony* in blurred, dill pickle tones. Evidently his mention of the word "operetta" had put her in mind of it.

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The war passed, and Lajos became sullen. He was no longer in the best of health. He wished he had the strength of character to liberate himself from the intolerable weight of his obligation towards this woman, but a strange fatality bound them together. This useless romance had occupied so much of his life that he would now have felt quite lost without it, as though a man reconciled to blindness were threatened with sight so late in life as not to matter. His romance had become an illness the body could no longer do without.

He saw her more frequently—every day, in fact. He even cooked for her when he had a few hours off. Promotion had come his way, and the Come-n-Gettit had moved to a more respectable neighbourhood, changing its name to the Filet Mignon in the process. He was now deputy head waiter of the establishment and seemed to take a certain pride in being dressed in tails around the clock. Even when off duty, he wore his formal attire and carried his thin head high under its mop of wiry grey hair. The waiters called him "the diplomat."

The reason for this peculiar serenity was that Mitzi had drifted off into a half-helpless indifference. She allowed him to do things for her without protest. A melancholy had settled over her, a resignation. She no longer even talked much, and when she did it was without colour, without invention. They were married in all but name. They no longer held hands, but she allowed him to take hers in his without responding. The toothless lioness might still have her dreams of glory, but she kept them majestically to herself. She had mellowed.

It was only on occasion that Lajos fancied he noticed a disturbing sidelong look, with infinite cunning in her eyes, usually when she thought she was not being watched.

One day, when he had just cooked her some stuffed cabbage, he noticed this furtive, dark glance, at once calculating, malicious, and terrible.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

She woke out of her daydream. "Revenge," she answered, simply.

"Revenge? Against whom?"

"All of you," she replied, in exactly the same way as before.

There was a pause.

"Life is not an operetta," she announced dispassionately. "You've no idea how you hurt me when you said that."

"I hurt you? Why? I admit, I was very angry—"

"Angry? I have often been angry. It is nothing. But to be hurt . . . that can last a lifetime. You allowed me to dream when I was

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young. You knew, didn't you? How cruel you were. How cruel."

Her ruminative calm was far more disconcerting than the tantrums of the past. He washed up with trembling hands and left. She may have mellowed, but she was slowly going mad.

The Hungarian revolution broke out in 1956. Lajos heard the news with alarm but had an evening of service before him, and it was midnight before he could hurry around to Mitzi's room. There was no light under the door. He knocked without receiving any reply. He tried the handle. The door was open. The room was empty. It looked as though it had been ransacked. Her jewel box was empty and lay on the floor. Old letters were strewn all over the place. An apron lay on the bed. He looked around in horror. Suddenly his eye fell on a note leaning against the mirror. It was addressed to him. He tore it open. All it contained was the enigmatic phrase, "Life is not an operetta?"

Distractedly, he wandered the streets, trying to decide what to do. He was not one to involve himself with the police for no reason. After all, this might just be part of that insane revenge she had talked about. The message might have been placed there in order to worry him out of his wits. He felt deeply resentful. Then it occurred to him that it might have been a suicide note. She might even now be floating in the East River. The police would want to know what the message meant. How could he explain it to them? He had left fingerprints all over the place. If she had committed some irrevocable act, could he not be suspected? How would his fingerprints have got on to the note if he pretended he had not been up to the room?

He was a potential suspect, and there is only an inch between a suspect and a criminal. He saw himself under the blinding lights of the detectives, his story sounding more and more incredible and disjointed. It would be better to go to the police now—and yet, in doing so, he might just be falling into her cunning trap. There was no solution. He went home and sat up all night thinking of alibis. The farther he wandered from the truth, the unhappier he became. At dawn he rushed out and bought the morning paper. There was no mention of suicide anywhere. He sighed with relief until it occurred to him that the body might not yet have been found. He was white as death and bilious with fatigue.

Mitzi arrived in Vienna that evening by air. Her American passport was stamped, and after a quick meal at the airport she took a taxi to the station. She was dressed in old clothes and wore no jewellery, for the simple reason that she had sold it

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all to make the trip possible—the platinum and emerald brooch from Dobos, saying "For ever", Prince Szent-Mihaly's pendant of diamonds and rubies, saying the same thing, and the other battle honours of her horizontal conquests.

At the station she reserved a third-class ticket on a slow train to a town which lies a few miles from the Hungarian frontier. Owing to the congestion on the line, the train crawled through the night, stopping frequently while officials on the line called to each other and traced mysterious patterns in the air with coloured lanterns. It began to rain, not gradually but with an almost insensitive intensity, as though a brigade of flamenco dancers had suddenly started a performance in the middle distance.

Just before four o'clock in the morning, the train finally pulled into the station. There were some figures on the farther platform, and from their shouting Mitzi knew them to be Hungarian. She left the station hurriedly. There were several trucks and vans in the parking place; at least two were ambulances, with large red crosses on them, while another was evidently a mobile recording unit of some broadcasting station. There was considerable activity, and Mitzi heard English, French, and some Scandinavian language spoken as she walked quickly into the sleeping town. Soon she reached the point where the main road passed through the town, and there she found the inevitable signpost pointing to Vienna in one direction and to the frontier in the other. She glanced at an illuminated electric clock which hung over a closed café. It was 4.21. There was no time to lose. Gallantly she began to direct her steps towards the Hungarian frontier.

There would be no dawn that day. Perplexed roosters began crowing with unconvinced inflections over the desolate countryside. She was suddenly blinded by headlights. She rolled into a ditch. The car rushed by, splashing her with a shower of freezing mud. It was an Austrian military vehicle. Cursing, she rose to her feet and, ignoring the fact that she was wet through, she bravely trudged on.

Soon some black figures became visible on the road before her. Hiding behind a clump of bushes, she waited, and because she was compelled to wait, she began to shiver. Her teeth rattled like a machine-gun, and she held her mouth shut with her hand, convinced that the noise could be heard miles off. The dreary little procession passed—four or five men, several women, a crying child, a cart. They were talking in Hungarian.

When they had gone, Mitzi resumed her journey. She heard some shots and then the barking of dogs; not the disorganised

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barking of some farmer's house guard but a more regimented sound, the deep-throated, disconcerting rasps of several large hounds of the same breed. The frontier. She turned off the main road and walked down a yellow cart track. After about a mile, she entered a marshy field and half fell, half staggered across it, following a route parallel to the main road. It was growing painfully light. The field led to another, seemingly endless. All of a sudden, in a clump of trees, she was confronted by a shallow stream swollen by the rain, flowing fast, leaving arrowheads of angry water where it met the opposition of protruding rocks. Without thinking twice, she plunged in, staggered, fell, and eventually reached the farther shore, a steep embankment rising to unknown ground. With tears of panic in her eyes, she struggled along the bank for a full half mile until she came to an innocent little path up the sharp incline. Moaning with exhaustion, she climbed it slowly, only to find a mass of barbed wire at the top.

She could not stop now. She took off her coat and laid it across the wire. Then she tried to crawl across it. Every time she had to retreat as the cruel barbs plucked her skin. Then she lost her temper and stepped on the coil, but as she did so the rest of the wire rose to meet her. She refused to retreat. Kneeling, falling, rolling, she passed through it. Her legs and hands were bleeding, but she was across.

After resting for a moment, she walked along the line of barbed wire on the east side of the stream, where the ground was high and firm. She was heading back to the main road. At length she could see a small house with a flagpole near it and a red, white, and green road barrier, gaily striped like a barber's sign. As she approached the house, she could hear evidence of some commotion inside it. A few dead bodies lying carelessly by the roadside did not reassure her. She paused, and as she did so she noticed how her wounds hurt her. She entered the customs shed.

A few terrified-looking peasants were standing around while a ferocious man in the uniform of a major in the security forces was walking up and down, brandishing documents and shouting. His eyes and his moustache were so black they had mineral tints of blue in them. Behind him stood two customs officials in attitudes of dismay and mute protest.

"We have shot eight of the swine this morning already," yelled the major. "There are six of you. That will make fourteen before breakfast—a fine catch of Fascist hyenas by any standards!"

Suddenly he caught sight of Mitzi.

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"Who are you?" he cried, and went on without waiting for an answer. "Aha, here is one fine lady who is so eager to leave the Socialist paradise that she even tries to escape in an unauthorised fashion. I can see from the state of her ladyship's legs that she attempted to negotiate the barbed wire which the state has thoughtfully placed along our frontiers for our protection, but when she found that the work of our engineers was too efficient, she calmly presents herself to the customs authorities and expects to be let through."

"You misunderstand—"

"Silence!" the major thundered. "The officials of the border control have been guilty of grave dereliction of duty and will be punished. Over a hundred citizens of our country have been allowed to cross into Austria. This is an intolerable situation. You no doubt thought that such criminal emigration was possible. I am here to tell you that you are wrong. Examples will be made of you all!"

"I am an American citizen," said Mitzi calmly, producing her passport from her bag.

The major's eyes narrowed. "Let me see that," he snapped. "Mrs. Schiffnick. Born in Kekesféhervar. July 9, 1908."

"Do you have to read the date out to the assembled company?" asked Mitzi hotly. "That should read 1918."

"Kekesféhervar? For our purposes, you are Hungarian."

"I am American, and the consul in Budapest knows that I am here," said Mitzi.

"You had a heart attack in the early hours of this morning," replied the major, with what he imagined to be a pleasant smile. "The people's government will express its condolences to your friend the consul."

The smile left his face. "Take them out and shoot them!" he yelled.

The peasants showed panic, but Mitzi was remarkably calm. She knew of no operetta with such an ending. Just then the phone rang. The major picked up the receiver. As he did so, the noise of a motorcycle could be heard.

"What? Impossible!" bellowed the major. "Repeat that at dictation speed. I don't believe it. What is that noise I hear? Shooting? Szilay—Szilay, answer! I order you to answer!"

During this halting conversation, a youth in a leather jacket had come in and had whispered excitedly to the two customs officers. As soon as the major laid down the receiver, he was seized by the three other men and carried struggling out of the room. After a momentary pause, there were three shots.

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The customs officers returned, and the senior one, a tall, blond, ascetic man, announced that a full-scale revolution was sweeping the country.

"This is the business of the young," he added. "You are free to go." Calling to Mitzi, he said, "Mother, I advise you not to try any tricks with forged passports. If it didn't deceive us, it will certainly not deceive the Americans." And so saying he threw her passport into the wastepaper basket.

"Why did you call me Mother?" asked Mitzi, deeply hurt. "Do I look so old?"

That evening found Mitzi in a refugee camp on the road to Vienna. A Dutch nurse had tended her wounds, she was wearing warm clothes sent from Italy, and she had a cold she had supplied herself. It had not yet been decided what to do with the refugees, and they were sitting around a bare room, talking and smoking.

During the course of the evening, a photographer wandered in. His clothes and his manner declared him to be American, and there was something eminently successful about his dishevelment and the calculated way in which the gum in his mouth was helping him to think. He was garlanded with cameras and flash bulbs. He looked around the crowded room with an expert and calculating eye.

Mitzi knew the curtain had risen, and without a flicker of self-consciousness she filled her lungs with a vast quantity of air, and it came out again to the tune of *Your Voice Is like a Symphony*.

Every head in the room turned to listen to her. The flash bulbs began to go off, and the gum was being chewed at twice the rate.

When Mitzi sensed the camera pointed in her direction, she thought of her father's death and began to weep copiously, without for a moment allowing her crying to affect her voice or her breathing. When the performance ended, the applause was tumultuous. The photographer knelt by her side.

"That was just great," he said. "My name's Cy Endhouse, from *Be* magazine. Wasn't that a song called *Your Voice Is like a Symphony*?"

"Yes," said Mitzi demurely.

Cy searched his memory. "Wasn't that from *Caravan Love*?"

"It was, yes."

"Wasn't that sung in New York by—?"

"Mitzi Somlos," she interrupted. It would be too painful if he made a mistake.

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"Yes. Yeah, that's right. Mitzi Somlos. Whatever happened to her?"

"I am Mitzi Somlos," she said, with immeasurable wistfulness.

"You! But, how—why are you here?"

"I chose freedom," she replied, with a fatalistic shrug of the shoulders, and added, "*They* wouldn't let me sing, for political reasons."

The next copy of *Be* magazine carried a full-page picture of Mitzi, shot brilliantly from an odd angle and captioned "*The Voice of Freedom.*" The picture eventually won Cy Endhouse the Pulitzer Prize for Photography, and deservedly so. A week later, Lajos received the following letter:

Dearest dreamer,

I am in Vienna, having escaped from Hungary after *many harrowing* adventures. I will tell you when I see you. I am waiting here to go to *America*, and I have given your name as a *reference*. I will, of course, come as a *refugee*. Now, my sweet Lajos, my childhood *lover*, I am in *terrible trouble*, and you *must help me* as only you can. As a result of a picture of me which appeared in the magazine *Be*, I have sold the story of my life under the *Communists*, who *prevented me* from singing because my *father* was a *landowner*, to the films for $100,000. Please, dear heart, don't let me down. *Dream* as you once did so *wonderfully*, and write down the story of my *life* without delay. I know I can *trust* you, as *always*.

Your own *little goose*,
MITZI

The letter reached Lajos as he was sitting in his hospital bed after a complete nervous breakdown as a result of his sense of guilt about Mitzi's presumed suicide. Before he suffered an unexpected relapse, he had just time to reflect that, for some rare, impossible, dangerous, and impervious people, life is an operetta after all, and can never be anything else.

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This story is taken from the author's new collection, "Frontiers of the Sea", published by Heinemann at 21*s.*

Argosy readers can look forward to a change of mood and setting in next month's Peter Ustinov story, "The Loneliness of Billiwoonga".

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THE BRAVE DIE ONLY ONCE

BY DAVID COLEMAN

THE cook put the coffee pot and plates of fried bacon, eggs and hot cakes on the table; then, with the poker, he hit the piece of iron bar hanging outside the door. Back in the cookhouse, he stood by the fire, his hands clasped behind him. He was about fifty, with the solid fat of a man who had been powerfully muscled.

Formerly a bush worker, he had specialised in chokering, which was the art of unravelling the maze of felled trees, stumps and brush, sending the fifty-, sixty- and seventy-foot lengths of medium spruce down to the sawmill with the least possible wastage of timber and time. One day a sapling had lain crushed by the drag of a skidded tree—for one brief moment he had been careless; the sapling had sprung when released from the weight, and the rising whip of it had broken his back. Now he was becoming a fair cook and had recently supplemented his apron with a chef's hat.

Frenchy the sawyer was first man in. Built like the cook, he was ten years younger. His Red Indian wife had died when their only child was young, and Frenchy had sent the girl to his mother in Quebec. Thereafter he faithfully posted to her every Christmas twenty dollars with a promise to return home soon, always reminding her that British Columbia, especially where he lived up in the heart of the interior, was so far away he couldn't guarantee anything.

The long table was formed by joining small tables end to end,

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and it was flanked by stools. Seventeen places were set, each cup upside down on a saucer which was on a plate between a knife and fork. Frenchy pulled aside the stool at his usual place and sat down. Finding himself too close to the table, he gripped the stool, raising it, and when he banged it down he was comfortably positioned for breakfast.

It was Sunday, and the meal was its usual hour later than on work days. The cook would have liked to bid Frenchy good morning, but was doubtful of the reaction because Frenchy had yesterday sent his half-monthly pay cheque to the professional gamblers in town as part-payment for accumulating poker debts.

John Neilson came in, tall, raw-boned. This morning his face accentuated his fifty-five years.

"Morning, John," the cook said. "Any men come back last night?"

"No-one in my shack," the Swede said, quietly oblique.

"That's good," the cook said. "I forgot to make porridge, and you know how them porridge eaters figure they can't get through the day without it." Then he grinned. "They'll be drifting back between now and tomorrow morning though, some with their pay all gone."

A pick-up truck drove into camp and the cook looked through a window. "The boss," he said.

The boss smiled a professional entry. He lived at the planing-mill, by the government road, eleven miles from the sawmill and a thousand feet lower. He wore a new suit and car jacket and his shoes were polished. The cook returned his greeting, Frenchy grunted between masticating, John Neilson continued sipping coffee, staring into the cup, his plate still empty of food. The boss's smile faded and he began breakfasting. Frenchy gulped a last cup of coffee and clumped out.

"Is the new road in yet?" the boss said to the cook. "In that section I want cleaned up."

"The Cat driver said only two stumps to blow," the cook said. "Easiest road he's run in this season. Course it's only a little road. Should be no trouble. But—I heard no bangs. Not yet."

"Well, there's all day today," the boss said pleasantly. "Eh, John? Then you can start felling there tomorrow."

John Neilson's eyes flickered across at him, then he put down his cup and left.

"He's been crabby and eating nothing for a week," the cook said in reply to the boss's astonished look. "I asked him if he had the bellyache from the grub, but he said no, the grub is fine."

The camp buildings formed three sides of a square and were

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of unpainted, unplaned lumber. All about stood the trees, darkly green where backed by forest, graceful in single silhouette. The mill was at the lower end of the clearing, beyond the artificial pond which was fed by a diverted mountain stream. Every work day the roar of the mill motor filled the place with sound, and the trees were first cut into logs before being canted on to the carriage that fed them to the head-saw. Gradually the soft green contours of the hillsides were changing into stump-littered ground where the riven timber browned through exposure. Later, the men and equipment would go, leaving sagging sheds, mounds of sawdust and silence.

John Neilson went up the three steps of his bunkhouse. Four cots were on either side of the room, a stove in the centre, and at the far end was a table and two stools. He lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. Once he raised himself on an elbow, reached for the tin of Copenhagen snuff on a nearby apple box and put a pinch between his lower lip and teeth. After that he occasionally tilted himself sideways to spit into a jam tin on the floor. Every morning he emptied its small contents. This morning it was almost full.

Suddenly he arose, putting the snuff-box in his pocket. Into another pocket he put a small carton of blasting caps which he took from the apple box. From where his clothes hung on nails on the wall above his bed, he took a coil of fuse and a small wrecking bar; then he went behind the shack where a piece of canvas covered a box of stumping powder and a sack. He thrust sticks of dynamite into the sack, thrust them in by the hurried handful, then he replaced the canvas, swung the bag on his shoulder and walked to a bush road.

A mile up he turned on to a trail freshly scraped by the bull-dozer blade. To make it, the driver had taken the Cat up an old road, crossed above the heavy timber and come down through the virgin bush, following the blazes nicked by John's axe.

Beyond the brow of a fifty-yard slope was the first of the two trees blocking the new road, a fir, already felled and topped. John felt weakness start at the back of his legs and move through his body, and he had to force himself to keep walking. As he passed the length of the tree, pointing campwards for easy towing, through habit he estimated the footage. Then he was at the stump, red-white, solid and tough-looking.

He found himself shivering as he put the sack, the box of caps, the coil of fuse and the wrecking bar on the stump. He looked about, seeing nothing and everything. In sudden determination, he seized the bar and jabbed between the roots where they first

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branched. When he found a soft spot he dug, scooping out the earth with his hands, making a hole under the heart of the fir.

He cut a length of fuse. Remembering the boss's comfort and security, he cut it wastefully long; then he put a blasting cap on one end, crimping it tight with his teeth. He counted the sticks of dynamite. Forty. Fifteen would send a fir stump to shredded glory any day, but now that he had too many, he resentfully decided to waste them; so he put in twenty-five. In an end of the last stick he made a hole with a twig, and into the hole he inserted the capped end of the fuse. Then he sealed the charge with earth, leaving the long bare end of the fuse projecting. This he split and widened with his fingernails, and the powder showed, black and iron grey.

Straightening, he took a deep satisfied breath and wiped his hands clean on his trousers. He had absent-mindedly spat out his snuff; so now he put a pinch inside his lip. He looked about, thinking how pleasant everything was. A clear sky heightened the beauty of the taller trees, and it was warm in the forest because of the wind protection.

A hundred yards along the trail was the other tree, a spruce. Here he cut the fuse the right length, put in the rest of the sticks, packed the hole and sat on the stump, thinking this was like old times when dynamiting was no more trouble than any other chore. He smiled at the recollection of his favourite summer practical joke—overcharging a blast close to camp and lightly packing the earth, then sneaking out next morning and lighting a fuse that gave him time to return and sit on his corner cot and watch the summer crew, old-timers, drifters and college kids, jerk awake in fright when the explosion shook the camp.

Suddenly the memory of the previous Sunday morning returned, and he actually felt his blood chill. Until that rogue blast, he had been a highball logger, tearing the heart out of the forest, making forty dollars a day, fifty, on occasion he had gone over seventy. But last Sunday morning, highballing had caught up with him. Safety regulations said a dud charge should be left untouched for two hours but, as all highballers knew, any man worth his contract would walk right up after five minutes, remove the charge and replace the cap and fuse. Which was how they got killed, but a man had a name and reputation at stake; which was how he almost got killed last Sunday morning when the world was suddenly filled with noise and a shock of hot acrid air that hurled him into a black void.

When he became aware of who he was and where, he was lying on bush debris, looking up through the branches of a tree,

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and he realised that he had been watching the passage of a white cloud across a patch of blue sky. He remained resting, vaguely wondering if he were hurt but doing nothing about it. When he arose, he was stiff though uninjured, but since then the recollection of what had happened gripped him with cold terror.

Still, he had just put in two charges, capped the highball way by crimping the deadly little capsule with the teeth, and he remembered the horror on the occasional onlooker's face when told that if anything went wrong, the pinch of white powder in the cap would rip a man's face apart, the explosion being contained in the mouth.

Thinking like that made him feel good, showed he had his nerve back. He would blow the spruce first, go to a large tree for shelter, wait for the blast, walk downtrail, fire the fir as he passed, carry on down to camp and hear the bang back in the bush, taking everything for granted as he always had.

He checked his gear, made sure the box of caps was in the special pocket of his jacket; then he lit the exposed fuse end. The powder sputtered into sparks, and blue smoke tickled his nostrils. Carefully calm, he walked up to the tree he had chosen for shelter, but halfway there he began doubting the length of the fuse and his pace; so he hurried, running the last few yards. Behind the tree he leaned against it, his legs quivering and taut muscled, sweat runnelling down his face, and he was panting.

After a few moments he became impatient for the blast. He craned his neck to see, and fear coursed through him when he failed to observe smoke. He was angrily wondering why he should so suddenly be burdened by another dud charge when it went off. Instinctively he jerked back his head, grazing his cheek against the bark of the tree. He closed his eyes and thankfully leaned against the trunk, dimly aware of the pattering of stones striking the brush and the thumps of falling stump sections.

When he felt strong enough he went down to the fir, passing the explosion area where the smoke was wisping away. He sniffed, heavily and often. Some men got a headache from powder smoke, but he liked it, really liked it, always had.

He sat on the fir and put snuff in his mouth, having too much there now, but being unaware of it; so that spittle dribbled over his lip, mixing with the blood from his grazed cheek. He was telling himself that there was nothing to blasting, nothing. Only when you worried about danger did danger worry you. Maybe he was all shaken up since last week, but he had plenty of nerve left, always having had more than his share.

He smiled at the memory of that bunkhouse long ago when

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that tough drifter had tossed a stick of stumping powder into the fire and everyone but himself had charged for the door, and the drifter had laughed, and he had just sat there watching because no-one was going to send him running and all that had happened was the stick had burned a beautiful green and golden flame. But his smile, now, as he sat on the fir, his legs almost straight because of its girth, was strangely warped, and an onlooker, seeing the blood and tobacco juice dribbling on to his check shirt, would have thought him on the verge of tears.

He was shaking when he struck the match to light the fuse, but his confidence returned as the flame ate its way into the charge, and he felt himself relax, weariness and fear leaving him, and he wiped his chin with his sleeve and remembered to spit out. When there were only a few inches of sputtering fuse left, he picked up his gear and walked downtrail, his heart surging with thankfulness at things turning out so well, and he was telling himself that he was going to be all right, that everything was going to be all right. On the slope he was tempted to look back and see if smoke was coming through the earth sealing the charge; but he had never done so in the old days, why should he do so now?

At the foot of the slope he found himself wishing for the blast, his wish increasing to a debilitating ache, though he might sustain an injury or even be killed. But the bush remained appallingly quiet. Even the squirrels and chipmunks were still.

When he walked on again, his legs were strangely stiff and unco-ordinated, the dribbling ran, and he was utterly weary, wracked by the latent effects of a manhood of rainstorms and blizzards, cold, privation, water wading, and reckless squandering of strength and endurance—like the other old-timers, loggers, trappers and prospectors who hung around pool halls or swamped bar-rooms or odd-jobbed in summer. Once they had been the pride of the north, ferocious with health and energy—like him. Now—he was like them.

He groaned and looked dazedly about, congealing with fear and humiliation and stupidity. He longed to die now, in the bush, amidst the beauty and freedom that he loved. Die now with manhood and good name intact. In a sudden frenzy he resolved to rush back to the fir stump and hurl himself against it and dare the dynamite to the death.

But he found it difficult to concentrate and his courage ebbed away. Once he would have risen to the challenge. Mad with pride and foolhardiness, he would have matched his life against fate. But that was long ago, before last Sunday morning.

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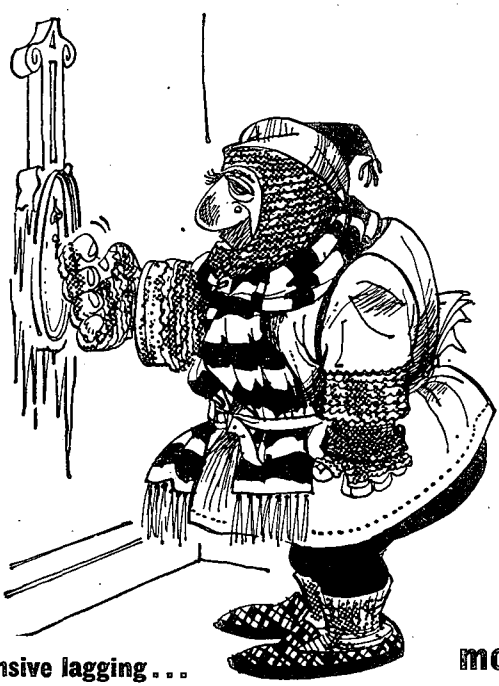
COLD COMFORT BLUES

Five ways to stay warm . . .
and a solution . . . by ROY DEWAR



Extensive lagging . . .

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Healthy Exercise . . .

Taking the waters . . .

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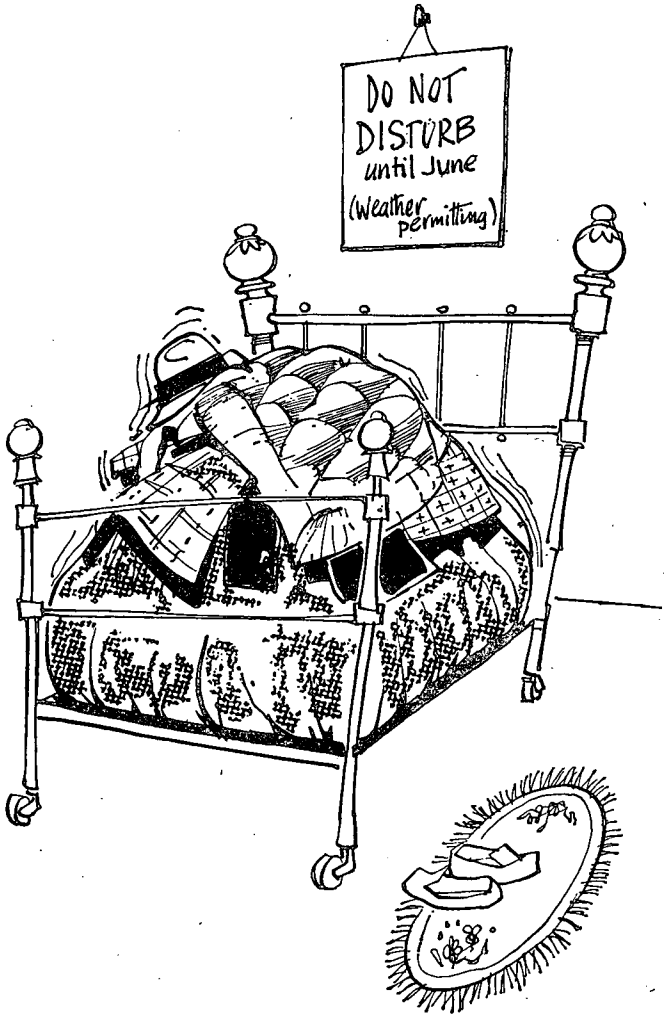

Hibernation . . .

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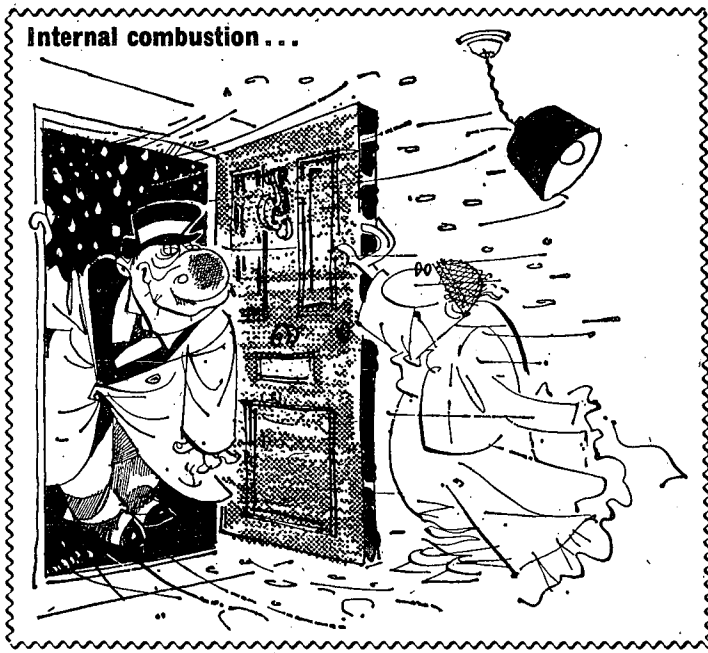

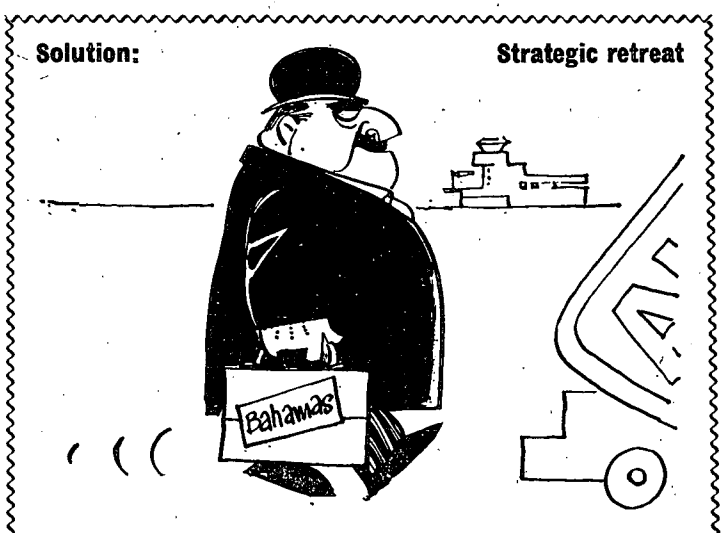

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Lucky One

BY RONALD JEANS

ON a sun-baked beach on the Costa Brava, Steven Bray, clad only in bathing trunks, lay on his back on a spread towel. You would rightly take him for a young-to-middle-aged Englishman toasting himself a nice deep brown. But Steven was not lying there for the purpose of sun-bathing. At the moment he didn't even know where he was.

With an effort he opened his eyes. The blue sky above him was blotted out by someone bending over him.

"I am a doctor. You're okay," said the figure, speaking English as most Continentals do, with a strong American accent. "You just rest quiet a bit and take it easy for the rest of the day." He spread a towel over Steven and departed.

From under the beach hat he looked about him. On his right a handful of bathers who had been grouped round him seemed to lose interest when they heard the doctor's verdict, and began to drift away. The immediate past came back to him. He had gone to the help of a young boy who had been in difficulties and had managed to bring him to within a few yards of safety. After that he remembered nothing. What had happened to the boy? He turned his head to his left. Close beside him, prostrate on his back like himself, lay another bather.

The man turned his head towards him and said, "How are you feeling, old man?"

"Max!" said Steven.

"Max it is," said Max. "Funny way to meet after ten years."

"What about the kid?"

"All right. They've taken him home."

"What happened?"

"You collapsed a few yards out, and I had to drag you both

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ashore. I must be in very poor condition—I nearly passed out myself. The doctor told me to stay put for a bit."

"Well, thanks very much," said Steven in a weak voice.

"Think nothing of it. If I hadn't, somebody else would." He had always made little of his good actions, just as he did of his bad ones.

Max rose to his feet, and Steven sat up.

"Feeling all right?"

"Fine," said Steven, "but I think I'll get back to my hotel."

"Where are you staying?"

"The Matador."

"I'm at the Grand. If you feel up to it, come and have dinner with me tonight."

"Thanks, I will."

And they parted.

After lunch, Steven retired to his room for a siesta. He was wondering why he had said he would dine with Max. Even though Max *had* dragged him out of a few feet of water, why disinter a friendship which he had imagined the sordid events of ten years ago had buried for ever. Max had played him the dirtiest trick one man can play another. They had not met since.

Why, then, had he accepted? Well, you couldn't refuse to dine with a man who had just saved your life, even if it had been in a very few feet of water. Perhaps Max felt he had wiped the scoreboard clean, that they were now all square.

Steven had always had the feeling that he and Max could never escape from each other. Max would always turn up, prosperous, gay, the master of his fate, while Steven would always remain the dull, plodding, predictable one. This power of making him feel inferior was odd, because Steven knew that in some respects he was Max's superior. Yet it was Max who was always the lucky one—from the time they had first met as small boys at their prep school. When they moved on to the same grammar school it had been Max who had won a scholarship at Cambridge without seeming to work for it, had gained his Blue at Rugger without any apparent effort on his own part, and eventually had been capped fourteen times for England, a distinction which led a stockbroker uncle to take him into his firm on a half-commission basis.

Steven remembered how at the time he had asked Max, "Do you know anything about stocks and shares?"

"No," Max replied, "but I know a hell of a lot of people."

This was during the period when they were sharing a flat in

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London in order to keep down their expenses. Steven, by dint of hard work, had passed most of his law exams, and was articled to a London firm of solicitors; and Max had not as yet decided how best he could employ his talents for the good of himself and society as a whole.

For the first year or so the sharing of the flat proved a success, but in the end it laid the fuse that was finally to explode their friendship.

For the flat was not really a flat, but a converted floor of a house, and they shared the only sitting-room. Thus when either wanted to entertain his own friends the other felt he must arrange to spend the evening out. In the case of girl friends it was Steven who suffered most, for Max seemed to acquire and discard these with monotonous regularity; so it was not surprising that finally it was a girl who was responsible for the break-up.

Max had warned Steven that he would be dining out, and Steven was settling down for a quiet evening by himself when the flat bell rang. On the mat he found a girl with enormous brown eyes who seemed surprised when Steven opened the door.

"I think I must have come to the wrong flat," she said.

"Who do you want?" he asked.

She gave Max's name.

"I'm afraid he's not in."

"But . . ." she hesitated, "he told me to come here—he's taking me out to dinner."

"Oh, I see," said Steven, who was beginning to realise how attractive she was, with her slim figure and dark hair. "In that case, do come in."

He led her into the sitting-room, explaining that he and Max shared the flat.

"Would you like a drink?" he asked.

"I think I'd better wait till he comes," she said.

"What time did he ask you to come?"

"Eight o'clock."

"It's nearly a quarter past now," said Steven. "I wonder if there's some mistake? He told me he'd be out for dinner, but he said nothing about coming back here first."

"Oh," said the girl. She was obviously puzzled, even a shade suspicious.

"We'll give him another five minutes, shall we, and if he doesn't turn up, I'll take you out to dinner."

"I don't see why you should," she said, but his suggestion of going out seemed to have allayed her suspicions.

"Because I hate eating in a restaurant alone," said Steven. He

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didn't mention the meal he had laid out for himself on the kitchen table.

They waited another ten minutes for good measure, and then went to a modest restaurant nearby which Steven used when he couldn't be bothered to cook for himself.

"I'm afraid this can't compare with the sort of place Max would have taken you to," he said.

"I prefer this kind," she said, quite sincerely, and Steven thought this girl wasn't Max's type at all. How he had come to ask her out to dinner was a mystery; but as her shyness evaporated she became more communicative.

Her name was Kay. She had worked for a few days as temporary typist in Max's office, and before she had left Max had asked her if she'd like to be his personal private secretary. She had hesitated, she didn't quite know why; and he had suggested they should have dinner together some night, to talk it over. He had fixed the dinner for tonight, asking her to call for him at the flat.

"Very strange," said Steven.

"I thought so, too," she said. "It's not the usual way to discuss a job with your future employer."

"I didn't mean that," said Steven. "I meant it's not the kind of engagement Max would forget."

She was on to this one in a flash. "Is he always taking girls out, then?"

"I didn't mean that," said Steven, again.

"You wouldn't tell me if he is," she said, and she didn't ask any more questions about Max.

During the meal he found his interest in her growing; this girl with the large brown eyes that dwelt on him with unfeigned absorption, as he talked to her about his various interests. So much so that before he said goodnight to her at her Tube station he had come to the conclusion that she was one of the most intelligent girls he'd ever met.

Later, when Max arrived home, Steven told him about the girl's visit.

"But it wasn't tonight," Max said, and consulted his pocket diary. "Yes, I thought so. It was fixed for tomorrow. *She* made the mistake."

"Not a very bright beginning for a personal secretary," Steven couldn't help saying.

"Oh, she told you about that, did she?" There was an edge of resentment in his tone. "You seem to have had quite a chat."

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"We did. When it was obvious that you weren't going to turn up, I took her out to dinner myself."

"I shouldn't have thought that was necessary."

"Perhaps not, but the poor girl seemed so disappointed."

"She did?" Max seemed a little placated by this.

"Well, perhaps I should have said surprised."

"I'll ring her up," said Max, making for the telephone.

"You needn't do that," said Steven. "She said she'd ring you tomorrow at your office."

The following evening, Max came home in a very bad temper. He went straight to the point. "I don't know what you said to that girl last night, but she rang me up this morning to call tonight's date off."

"Did she say why?"

"She said she'd decided not to take the job I'd offered her."

"And you said, 'That's no reason why you shouldn't dine with me'."

"On the contrary, I said, 'Okay, it's a free country,' and rang off."

They didn't mention the incident again, but Steven was conscious of the rift it had caused, and he wasn't surprised when Max, who was now doing extremely well out of his stock-broking, announced that he had found himself a more central flat and if Steven didn't mind, etc. . . .

Steven didn't mind at all. His lease was nearly up and he had no intention of renewing it now that sky-scraping blocks were rising all over London. He was himself in a better financial position, and felt he could afford a bachelor flat with more modern amenities. In due course he moved into a small flat on the fifth floor of a block in Bayswater.

He had another reason for welcoming the breach with Max. For some time Steven had been seeing Kay, and he couldn't avoid a slight sense of guilt in keeping the fact from Max. By the time he had moved he and Kay were seeing a great deal of each other. She was still the most intelligent girl he had ever known, but not so sophisticated that he couldn't take pleasure in initiating her into some of the deeper satisfactions of life.

Moving, as they did, within a restricted area of London it was inevitable that they should eventually run into Max.

It happened in a bar in Jermyn Street, and to Steven's relief Max showed neither surprise nor animosity. The three of them had several drinks together, and Max insisted that they should dine with him. He took them to the most expensive restaurant within range—he was now at the peak of his success—and Steven

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was delighted that all memory of the rift between them seemed to have disappeared. He could only assume that Max must be involved in some new romantic adventure, and his interest in Kay had therefore lapsed.

Seeing Kay home afterwards in a taxi, Steven had said, "No regrets that you're not his secretary?"

"Good heavens, no," said Kay, "but he is a charmer, isn't he?"

They saw quite a lot of Max after this. Steven felt he ought to return the hospitality, and asked him to dine with them, suggesting he should bring a girl of his own to make up a four. Max said he would, but turned up without the girl, saying she had gone down with 'flu. Afterwards, Steven wondered if this had been a deliberate move to leave Max free to exert his considerable charm on Kay.

Max invited them to go and see *his* new flat—a very superior one in Mayfair. Then he had to come to see Steven's flat, and so one meeting led to another, and all the time, though her attitude to him remained the same, Steven had the feeling that Kay was coming more and more under Max's spell. Was Max, for all his friendliness, determined to pay him out for having, as he thought, snatched Kay? Steven remembered how at school Max had hated being beaten, though he never showed it. But he never failed to seek an opportunity for revenge.

Steven found himself laying little traps for Kay and despising himself for doing so. If she telephoned him to say she was tired and didn't feel like going out that night, he would wait for an hour or two, and then ring back to make sure that she hadn't gone out with Max. His excuse would be that he wanted to hear her voice, or that he hoped she was feeling better; but Kay, who was too intelligent to be taken in, would laugh at him and call him a jealous old buffalo, making him feel ashamed, although relieved.

He had always thought Kay was not the sort of girl to be swayed by material possessions, but he began to have doubts. When they went into the country at weekends, which they had to do by coach or train, since Steven did not yet own a car, there seemed to him an implied rebuke to himself in her constant envy of the couples in sports cars who forced them into hedges in country lanes. Max, he knew, had a car, though he had no reason to believe that Kay had ever been in it.

In June his firm decided to send him to the south of France to see a client who was in trouble over the purchase of a villa there, and, the night before he left, Kay came to his flat for supper. He was catching a very early plane the following morning, and

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after supper she helped him to pack his one small suitcase. When this was finished, the case closed, and a label attached, he said, "Now, I'll see you to the Tube."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Kay. "You have to be up at the crack of dawn. You're going to bed."

Steven thought this very thoughtful of her, and after a half-hearted protest, agreed. They kissed, and Steven went with her to the lift. Here they kissed again.

"Be good!" said Kay, as she stepped into the lift.

"You, too," said Steven. She gave him one of her ravishing smiles and waved to him as she was carried out of sight.

Steven went to his flat. He turned off the lights in the sitting room and opened the window wide to dispel the smoke fumes of the evening. He leaned out for a moment to assess the weather for his flight in the morning. It was dry, with a clear sky, but quite a strong wind was blowing along the narrow side street on to which his flat looked. He debated for a moment whether he should take in the four flowerpots which graced the window sill, but the tulips were in full bloom and would be finished by the time he returned from Nice.

He was about to close the window when he saw Kay walking along the pavement below, and as she drew nearer he became aware of a familiar figure approaching her from the opposite direction. A glance along the street showed him a parked sports car, which he recognised as Max's.

Kay and he met and kissed. They were directly beneath his window. Steven's hand was on the sill, immediately behind the fourth flowerpot. The next moment the flowerpot was no longer there, and Steven had rushed madly into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. He stood there, breathing hard. It was an accident, he told himself; his hand must have slipped. But was it? He remembered nothing but the feel of the rough *terra cotta* against the back of his hand. There, beside him on the floor, was the ready packed suitcase.

Panic seized him. He picked up the case and made for his front door. To reach it he had to pass through the sitting-room. Half hopefully, he glanced at the window. Perhaps he had imagined the whole thing? But no: the fourth flowerpot was missing. Without a pause he continued on his way, pulling the flat door shut behind him as he went.

Going down in the lift he prayed that there would be no-one in the front hall. There wasn't a soul. Out through the revolving doors, and along the street he went. There was hardly any traffic, and he looked in vain for a taxi. As he turned into the Bayswater

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Road he heard the insistent twang of an ambulance bell, and immediately the ambulance appeared in the distance. It passed him and turned down the street he had just left. Steven stood still and watched it go. For a moment he hesitated; should he go back? But the approach of a taxi with its illuminated sign decided him. He hailed it and told the driver, "London Airport." Arriving there, he set about arranging a transfer from his early-morning flight to a night flight.

Beneath an air of efficiency there remained a cold fear in his heart. He kept telling himself that they deserved whatever they had got, but he couldn't blot out the picture of two bodies stretched out on the pavement in a pool of blood. One of them might even be dead. They might both be dead. No. Be sensible. One flowerpot couldn't kill two people.

Sleep on the plane was impossible. What a fool he had been to run away! Not even to have looked! Perhaps the flowerpot had not even touched them, and they had gone on their way unhurt. On their way . . . where to? It was obviously a pre-arranged meeting. There was only one construction to be put on it. Jealousy and anger flooded back.

He arrived at Nice jaded after a sleepless night. During the next two days he managed to do the work he had come to do, though his attention was only half on his client's business. The jealousy was now giving way to guilt and fear; fear of what he would find when he went back. Would it perhaps be wiser not to go back? He played with this idea for a while, but his reason told him how foolish it would be. Such a course could only confirm his guilt. Besides, how was he going to live?

Nevertheless he cabled his firm to say that his return would be delayed for a day or two, though in fact his business had been completed. Doing this, and cancelling his return booking with Cook's gave him the temporary relief of action, but accentuated the idleness which followed. He sat listlessly on the *Promenade des Anglais*: for him the blue sky and sunshine of the Riviera might not have existed.

By the afternoon he had decided that anything was better than inactivity, and he went once more to Cook's to try to get a seat on the night flight to London. He was now in a ferment of anxiety in case he should have to spend another night in Nice, but he was able to get his ticket, and felt an almost physical relief as he pocketed it. He would at last be able to exchange imagination for fact, however painful.

As he entered the hall of the block of flats, suitcase in hand, the porter came forward to take it from him, and asked if he had

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had a good trip. Steven reckoned that the porter would scarcely have done this if he had been wanted for attempted murder, and he felt a lightening of his worst fears. As they reached the lift the porter said, "By the way, sir, I have a message from the manager. He asked me to point out to you that single flower pots are not allowed on the window sills, and would you please use the regulation window-boxes?"

"Yes, of course," said Steven.

"The maid found one of your flowerpots had fallen into the street. Must have been caught by the wind, I reckon. It was a very windy night."

"It didn't do any damage, I hope?"

"No, sir, but it might have."

"Quite. I'll use window-boxes in future."

"Thank you, sir."

In his flat he found a letter from Kay. She had tried her best, she wrote, to fight against her growing feelings for Max, but they had been too strong for her. She couldn't go on deceiving Steven any longer. She was deeply sorry to hurt him, but it was better to face the truth, wasn't it?

No mention of the flowerpot. They, too, must have blamed the wind, and thought no more about it. Steven tore up the letter. It didn't seem to call for any answer.

He had never seen Max or Kay again.

Until today, when Max had pulled him out of the water. He tried to recall how he had felt when he had read Kay's letter ten years ago. It was difficult; even the strongest emotions fade with the years. He had cursed Max, and cursed himself for not foreseeing that Max, as always, would walk off with the prize. He had vowed never to speak to Max again, and it had been easy to keep that vow, for their paths had never crossed. Why, then, had he promised to dine with Max at the Grand? Oh, well, after all, Max had pulled him out of the water.

Steven looked at his watch. He must have dozed off, for it was nearly seven o'clock. Refreshed from his sleep, he slid off his bed, put on some clothes, and made his way to the Grand.

He found Max sitting on the terrace before the hotel. Now that he was normally dressed he looked more like the old Max, and Steven was at once conscious of the indefinable bond which had once held them together. After the preliminaries of drink-ordering, Max laughed rather self-consciously.

"Queer meeting," he said.

"There's something I feel I must tell you," said Steven. "It's

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been on my mind ever since you pulled me out of the sea today."

"Don't say it. You threw a flowerpot at us."

"You knew?"

"Yes. Kay had forgotten that one of your windows looked out on that street."

"It was a damned silly thing to do."

"It certainly cooked your goose with Kay. She was convinced you were trying to kill us both."

Steven found nothing to say to this, and in a moment Max went on: "But you were wrong to assume that I was trying to lure her away from you. I only meant to console her for a few days while you were abroad."

The same old Max, still able, with an ingratiating smile, to turn his less creditable actions into acts of philanthropy.

"And you didn't do *me* a good turn either," he went on. "Kay and I never managed to hit it off. She was too nice a girl for me."

"You mean she wanted you to marry her?"

"Yes. Oh, I don't blame her—she's that sort of girl. She's been married for some years now, with a couple of children."

"What sort of bloke did she marry?"

"A chartered accountant. I look after his investments for him."

They finished their drinks and went in to dinner. They did not mention Kay again. Steven was leaving for home next morning, and as they parted, Max said, "I'll be seeing you?" There was a note of interrogation in his voice.

"Of course," said Steven.

A week or two later Steven, searching the shelves of a bookshop in Charing Cross Road, found himself standing next to a friend of Max's who had several times come to see him at the shared flat.

"You look nicely tanned," he said. "Where have you been?"

Steven told him.

"Did you see anything of Max there?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then you know all about it?"

"About what?"

"What I read in today's *Times*. He saved a boy from drowning."

"Oh, he did, did he? But why on earth was it in the *Times*?"

"It was in the *Times* because the father of the boy, a wealthy Spanish industrialist, has shown his gratitude by giving Max a present of £5,000 as well as recommending him for the Spanish medal for life-saving. Isn't that surprising?"

"Not if you know Max," said Steven.

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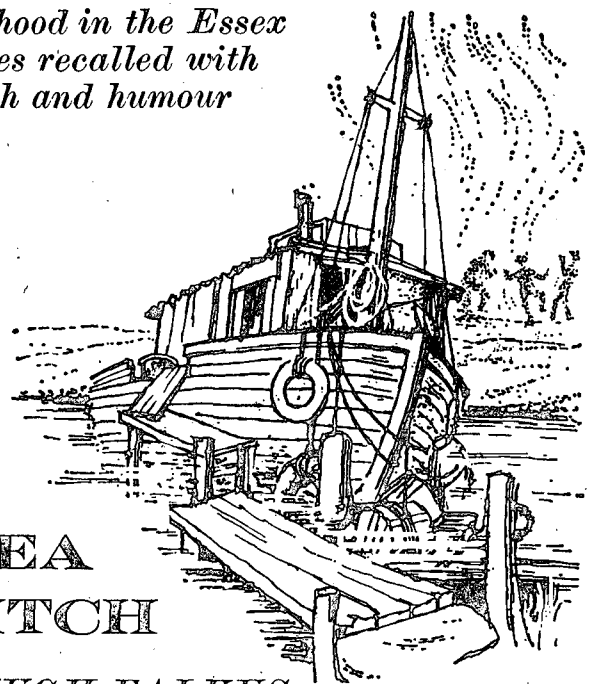
A boyhood in the Essex marshes recalled with warmth and humour



SEA WITCH

BY HUGH FALKUS

ONE of my few boyhood friends was an old one-eyed Essex fisherman and wildfowler named Puggy Dimmond. This carefree character, who in his younger days had been skipper of a sailing barge, lived in the decaying houseboat *Sea Witch*, an ancient and unseaworthy craft which lay stuck in the mud beside a sea-wall on what was then a practically deserted island.

A man of simple philosophy, old Puggy Dimmond hadn't really a care in the world. Although by modern standards his material comforts were few, there was little he had to worry about. A convenient tide line provided him with firewood in addition to the occasional yacht's dinghy, timber, kegs, oars, spars, fenders, lifejackets, and other sundry flotsam and jetsam which he bartered or sold. This, together with a modest income derived from fishing and wildfowling in their seasons, supplied his frugal wants—mainly tobacco and rum. Blessed with a strong constitution, he was a contented robust old man who

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enjoyed an independent, happy-go-lucky, rate-free existence aboard *Sea Witch*.

And then one day a letter arrived which threw this even tenor into sudden confusion and alarm.

Apart from an exchange of Christmas greetings with his married sister in Ipswich, he had long abandoned the responsibility of correspondence and viewed the receipt of letters with misgiving. That this particular missive should so devastate his peace of mind was not surprising. It came from Mr. Edward Herrington, Inspector of Rates for the local council. Brief and very much to the point, it announced his intention of visiting Puggy on the following Wednesday to check the *Sea Witch*'s qualifications for inclusion in the list of rate-free floating homes.

I was not present when Puggy opened his letter. But I can imagine him reading it slowly aloud to himself, grunting with dismay as its minatory implications sank home.

He came hurrying in search of my father, puffing up the *Neptune*'s gangway, his solitary blue eye gleaming fiercely, the buff envelope clasped in a big muddy paw.

"Here's a fine thing! Here's a proper owld swindle! Read that, sir. Just read that." He pushed the envelope into my father's hand and stood panting indignantly, broad shoulders hunched, head thrust aggressively forward.

Father read the letter carefully and snorted with disgust.

"Of all the ruddy cheek! Herrington thinks your boat won't float and wants to sting you for rates."

A rebel and champion of lost causes, my father harboured a life-long hatred of officialdom.

"Pay rates, indeed! It's absurd. Why the blazes should you?"

He stopped, suddenly thoughtful.

"By the way," he said slowly. "*Does* the *Sea Witch* ever float?"

Puggy shook his white head. "No," he answered truthfully. "She don't. And never likely to, neither."

"Hm. . . . That's a pity. Never mind, we'll do the best we can."

Father gave the old man a comforting buffet. "Tell you what, I'll come over on Wednesday and give you a bit of moral support. We'll meet the damn fellow together. Don't worry, Pug. We'll see him off!"

Next Wednesday morning we were standing on the island sea-wall looking down at the sagging, tarred hulk that was Puggy's cherished home. The interview was not going well.

"There's no two ways about it, Dimmond," said Mr. Herrington firmly, thrusting out his lower lip. "She's got to float and that's all there is to it."

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Puggy scratched his nose and squinted sideways at his unwelcome visitor. "How d'you mean, 'xactly?"

"Well—*move*, of course." Mr. Herrington's stringy Adam's apple leaped up and down. "I want to see your boat with the tide in. I want to see it actually floating."

"Ah . . . " Puggy nodded slowly as one digesting a great truth. "You want to *see* 'er floating, eh?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Herrington. There was a long silence.

The tide was out and a keen November wind shivered the clusters of sedge and rice grass which dotted the mud flats. High overhead cotton-wool clouds hurried across a pale blue sky. A flock of knots and dunlin twisted past down the creek, their bellies gleaming in the wintry sunlight.

Alongside the sea-wall in a narrow gut fringed with sea-blite the *Sea Witch* slumped snugly in the mud. As always, she leaned with a pronounced outward list on her starboard sheer-leg from which, like a row of pennants, wisps of dried sea-weed hung fluttering in the wind. It was a sharp wind, straight from the North Sea. It whined over the marshes, flapping Mr. Herrington's shiny blue trouser legs against his knees and causing even Puggy, that weather-hardened veteran, to turn away with hunched shoulders.

Mr. Herrington shivered and huddled down inside his overcoat collar. He was a prim, thin, mousy, but not disagreeable, little man with a straggly moustache and ill-fitting false teeth. I could not take my eyes off those teeth. When he spoke they slid up and down independently of his jaws. Like pistons. Quite fascinating. Puggy tried again.

"See here, Mr. Herrington," he said patiently, as though appealing to some backward child. "Why come wasting your time on all this? O' course she'll float. She's a boat, isn't she? You c'n see that for yourself. You c'n *see* she is."

"I can," agreed Mr. Herrington reasonably. "And if . . . "

"An' all boats float, don't they?" Puggy insisted, pushing his nose close to Mr. Herrington's pale face, his head cocked on one side. "You know that, don't you? O' course you do. Everybody knows that. That's what boats is meant to do."

Mr. Herrington smiled briefly. I caught a glimpse of those teeth sliding back into position.

"Indeed it is, Dimmond. Indeed it is. And if this—er—boat of yours *does* float, that's all right. There's no further argument."

Puggy puffed out his cheeks and pushed back the faded blue peaked cap which covered his white hair. "An' if not?" he demanded aggressively. "What then?"

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Mr. Herrington shrugged. "Well, I'm afraid you'll just have to pay." He was sympathetic but firm. "There's no alternative."

Father, who had been listening in silence, cleared his throat—a sure sign he was about to unload some tendentious nonsense.

"I—er—don't think there's any question of a rating assessment, Herrington," he pronounced grandly. "There's not the slightest doubt about the boat being able to float. I can vouch for that. After all, she *got* here, didn't she?" He waved a hand towards the creek which separated the island from the mainland. "I mean, she could hardly have come by road."

"No, sir," agreed Mr. Herrington politely. "But you see, the point is I've got to satisfy myself that she floats *now*." His eyes flickered. "I've no doubt that she did once. But that was yesterday. It's what she does today that matters; and if she doesn't float now, she's not a proper houseboat or 'floating home' within the meaning of the Act. Therefore, she's liable to district rating just like any other house."

Puggy winced. "The old *Sea Witch* an *'ouse*! Well I'll be . . ."

His voice trailed off. He raised his face skywards as though inviting the indulgence of divine authority.

"An 'ouse! I can't believe it."

Although sensing defeat, Father battled on.

"Oh, but come, come, Mister Herrington. A pure formality, surely?" He said it smoothly, as one man of the world to another. "Why bother yourself? I'm sure you can take my word for it. She'll float all right when the tide comes high enough to lift her. Mind you," he added hastily. "It doesn't come high enough very often."

"Just so," murmured Mr. Herrington. He had his notebook out and was making a rough sketch of Puggy's boat and her mooring arrangements. "All the same, I'd like to see her floating with my own eyes. Seeing's believing, as they say."

His scepticism was understandable. Whatever he had expected, his first sight of the *Sea Witch* must have made him reel. She had started life as a fishing smack, back in the mists of the last century. Now, she boasted nothing on deck except a big wooden shed about seven feet high which was built up from the gunwale all round from stem to stern. This shed—or "deck-house," to use Puggy's happy euphemism—contained the living-quarters. There was no accommodation in the hull itself. Water gurgled in and out between the rotting planks with each spring tide, and what remained of her bilges was full of mud and seaweed. She looked like a derelict Noah's ark; her only adornments, a stove pipe poking out through the roof

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and a short pole from which Puggy, with patriotic fervour, flew a Red Ensign on days of national festivity.

Let there be no mistake. She was a most excellent home. The deck-house was snug and trim. Many a happy hour had Father and I enjoyed with Puggy beside his red-hot roaring stove. But the chances of *Sea Witch* ever floating again were exceedingly remote. And we all knew it.

Emotion, which had been welling up inside Puggy, burst suddenly forth.

"It's ridic'lous!" he exploded. "Absolutely ridic'lous! I never heard nothing like it." He flung his arms wide in a dramatic gesture. "Float? O' course she'll float. I c'd take her to sea tomorrow, if I had to. Why—with a bit of a mast I c'd sail her to Harwich and back." He turned appealingly to my father. "Couldn't I, sir? You know I could. You *know* I could."

"Certainly," agreed Father, stoutly. "No doubt about it."

"Well, let's hope you don't have to, Dimmond," said Mr. Herrington with an attempt at humour. "Let's hope you don't have to. We don't want to lose you just yet." He put the notebook away and looked at his watch. "I'll have to be getting back to the office. You just let me know when the tide's high enough to float your boat and I'll come and have a look. Sometime between now and Christmas, eh? I'd like to get this matter settled as soon as possible." And that was that.

The axe of the law was poised. It was evident that if old Puggy were to escape the iniquity of a rating assessment, Mr. Herrington would have to be satisfied the *Sea Witch* could float. That she would never do so in her present condition was equally certain. She was no more seaworthy than a sieve. What could be done about it? Repairs were out of the question. Apart from the expense, her rotten timbers and spongy planking made risible any attempt at plugging those gaping seams.

But Puggy was not to be dunned if Father could help it. It seemed absurd to him that an old man living in a boat far out on the marshes should have to pay rates.

"It isn't right," he said vehemently over and over again. "What the devil difference does it make whether the thing floats or not?"

Nevertheless, the issue was clear. It was float or pay; and there seemed to be no way out of it.

And then, as Christmas approached, they conceived a plan of beautiful simplicity. The *Sea Witch* would never lift to another tide by herself, but why not give her a helping hand? Supposing a lot of empty oil drums and tar barrels were lashed all round her

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water-line, surely they would provide sufficient lift to heave her out of the mud and satisfy the law as interpreted by Mr. Herrington?

Well . . . it was worth trying.

There was no lack of assistance once the news got about. And during the weeks following Mr. Herrington's visit, a pile of barrels, oil drums, petrol tins, baulks of timber, and anything else which might help to hoist Puggy's boat from her muddy grave materialised on the sea-wall nearby.

By the time Father and I joined the five other helpers on Floating Day, everything was lashed firmly in position.

In answer to Father's hail, Puggy emerged grinning from the deck-house. He carried a wicker-covered stone jar of naval rum which had been washed up on the marshes from some war-time wreck.

"Something to keep the cold out," he chuckled, handing Father a battered tin mug.

Father sampled it.

"I see what you mean. By Jove—this is the real stuff!"

The other men, needing no urging, helped themselves in turn. There was much smacking of lips and other appreciative noises.

"Can I have some?" I asked.

"No, boy," said Puggy, with a glance at Father. "But there's a bottle of lemon fizz for you on the deck-house table."

I went up the swaying gangplank in search of my bottle. Inside the deck-house, everything movable had been lashed down and the bulkheads stripped of ornaments. Puggy was taking no chances.

Mr. Herrington arrived shortly before dusk, just as the tide was beginning to fill the little creek below the sea-wall.

"What's all this?" he asked in surprise, staring at the lines of kegs and barrels tied all round the *Sea Witch*. "What have you tied all those on for?"

"They're stabilisers," Father explained solemnly. "It's all that top hamper, you see. With no ballast on the keel and that great big heavy deck-house stuck up above, she's got a very high centre of gravity. She needs something to steady her when she floats, or a strong gust of wind might turn her over."

"That's right," nodded Puggy. "Best to be safe than sorry."

Mr. Herrington seemed satisfied. There was a biting wind and his heart was probably at home by a warm fireside. The sooner the job was settled one way or the other the sooner he could get back to toast his feet.

"Well?" he asked, rubbing his hands together briskly as Puggy

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came waddling up with the stone jar. "How long will it take d'you think?"

"Not long now, sir," said Puggy very politely. "Tide's making up the creek this very moment. Highest tide o' the month. We'll soon have the owld girl afloat." He proffered the stone jar. "Drop o' rum?"

Mr. Herrington shook his head.

"Er—no thank you, Dimmond. Not for me. I never touch it."

"What! No rum?" said Father, stepping quickly into the breach. "You're missing something good. Just the stuff for a cold night." He drank noisily and with evident relish from his mug.

Mr. Herrington hesitated, eyeing the jar. It was a bitter evening, with a hint of snow on the wind.

"Well—I don't usually . . . But under the circumstances . . . Perhaps just a small one."

"Cert'nly, sir." With a wink at Father, Puggy produced another mug and poured the inspector a liberal measure.

The east wind raved across the marshes and the late afternoon turned to dusk. Someone had lighted a driftwood fire by the sea-wall, and the men stood round it warming their hands and backsides, and supping from their mugs. For a time, Mr. Herrington stood slightly apart from the group as befitted the importance of his station, but gradually he found himself edged nearer and nearer to the fire where a further large measure of rum was poured into his mug.

And as they stood there in the wild twilight waiting for the creek to fill, the wicker-covered jar was passed from hand to hand with grunts of pleasure and appreciation, and every time it went round more liquor was thrust on the little inspector, his faint protests overcome by the bluff insistence of his companions.

"Just to keep out the cold, Mister 'errington."

"Look arter Mister 'errington there, Jim."

"Just another mouthful, Mister 'errington, sir."

And so it went on.

And the tide crept higher, lifting the tangled clumps of seablite which festooned the creekside, and lapping on the *Sea Witch*'s tarred, sun-blistered planks. Marks were made. Watches anxiously scanned. But never a movement from the old hulk.

At length, Mr. Herrington left the fire and peered into the darkness. "Not afloat yet, Dimmond?" he enquired owlishly. "What's happening?"

"She's stuck, sir," Puggy explained. "It's the suction of the

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mud, you understand? Terrible stuff mud, sir, when it gets a hold on a boat. Why, once in the 'umber, I seen a barge swallowed up between tides. Weren't no more'n her top-m'st showing when daylight come."

"Oh!" said Mr. Herrington. "Is that so? Then you mean she isn't going to float after all?"

"Oh yes she is," Father put in quickly. "But, as Puggy says, she's stuck. We'll have to rock her out of that mud somehow. Rock her out," he repeated. "That's what we'll have to do."

"I don't care what you do," said Mr. Herrington carefully. "As long as she floats. That's what I've come to see." He giggled, tripped and almost fell.

"Easy there," said Father, catching his arm. "Steady the Buffs." He turned to Puggy. "How long have we got?"

Puggy shrugged, looking anxiously at the water. "Not long, sir," he muttered. "Getting somewhere near it now."

Father turned to the others.

"Come on then. Let's give her a shove."

They clambered down into the creek carrying poles and baulks of timber and put their shoulders to the task. Panting and cursing, their poles set against the old boat's topsides, they pushed and shoved, but still the *Sea Witch*'s great leaning bulk refused to budge. After five minutes of this they turned away from her and came squelching out on to the bank.

"Doesn't look as if you're going to be successful, Dimmond," said Mr. Herrington articulating slowly. "High tide's about now, isn't it?"

Puggy grunted and pulled his silver turnip watch from a waistcoat pocket hidden beneath his sweater. Everyone crowded round.

" 'nother few minutes yet," a voice said hopefully. "This owld wind'll help un."

Puggy peered from his watch to his water gauge, a stick pushed into the mud beside the creek, and shook his head.

"Reckon this is it. Tide won't make no more."

"Right-o," said Father, grimly. "It's now or never. Come on!"

A strange silence fell. The barrels and drums were straining at their lashings and the sound of slapping water seemed very loud. Perched on the salting's edge, Mr. Herrington craned unsteadily forward, his flashlamp wavering now on the *Sea Witch*'s water-line, now on the muddy water.

"All together," Father yelled. "Heave!"

And down in the shadowy creek they splashed and shoved with grunts and cries. Suddenly, the old boat shuddered.

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"She's going!" Puggy roared. "Come on! All together now . . . 'eave!"

With fresh enthusiasm they heaved again, their boots churning the water into froth. Then, all at once, with a loud sucking sound like a cork coming from a giant bottle, the starboard sheer-leg rose up out of the mud, and the *Sea Witch* went rolling over from one side to the other.

A wash of water swept up the bank wetting Mr. Herrington to the thighs. There was a clank of falling pots inside the deck-house. From the men, a shout of triumph went pealing to the stars and set the redshanks crying down the creek.

"She moved! She moved!"

Puggy was dancing about. His precious jar, much lighter now, clutched to his chest, his face aglow in the flickering firelight.

"I knew un would! I knew un!"

Excitedly, he thrust his long nose close to Mr. Herrington's face. "She moved! You saw un?" Mr. Herrington nodded weakly.

"Hooray! Hooray!" screamed Puggy in triumph, taking Mr. Herrington's acknowledgement as a sign of victory. *"She's afloat!"*

This was an emotional statement and palpably untrue. *Sea Witch* sagged motionless in the creek, her bottom planted firmly in the mud. But whereas hitherto she had listed ten degrees to starboard, she now and for evermore listed ten degrees to port.

Nobody cared. More driftwood was heaped on the fire, and flames licked up as the tide began to ebb.

Mr. Herrington flapped at his wet trousers, softly moaning to himself. He waved an unsteady hand in refusal of the stone jar, attempted to pull one shoe from the mud, failed, and sat down heavily in a pool of water.

Hands helped him to the sea-wall. He was murmuring : "Oh dear, oh dear, what will Ethel say?"

Father and the others were capering round the fire waving their mugs in a salute to victory and singing at the top of their voices. After a while, surrendering to general entreaty, Mr. Herrington staggered over and joined them as they jigged about laughing and singing, and jostling each other in the glowing thought of officialdom outwitted.

To me, watching from the long crab grass on the sea-wall, it was a fantastic and exciting scene. Silhouetted against that blazing fire, the figures moved like dancers in some weird tribal ceremony. And the column of sparks twisting up into a velvety, flashing, star-studded winter sky seemed the very flame of life itself.

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A GLIMPSE OF THE MEETING OF A RETURNING SOLDIER AND A LONELY WOMAN . . . A STORY BY ONE OF RUSSIA'S GREATEST LIVING AUTHORS

Morning Rain

BY KONSTANTIN PAUSTOVSKY

THE STEAMER arrived at Navoloky at night. Major Kuzmin went on deck. There was a steady drizzle and the landing-stage was deserted, lit by a solitary lamp.

"Where's the town?" thought Kuzmin. "Nothing here but darkness and rain, devil take it!"

He hunched his shoulders and buttoned up his coat. A cold wind blew from the river.

He found the mate and asked him if they would be staying long at Navoloky.

"About three hours," answered the mate. "Depends on the loading. Why? You're going further on, aren't you?"

"I've got a letter to deliver. From my neighbour in the hospital. It's to his wife. She's here in Navoloky."

"Hm. . . . That's awkward," sighed the mate. "You can't see a thing here. Better listen for the boat's hooter or you'll get left behind."

Kuzmin stepped on to the landing-stage and climbed the steep bank by a slippery stair. He could hear the sound of the rain on the bushes. He stood still, to accustom his eyes to the darkness and saw a dejected-looking horse and a lop-sided droshky. The top had been raised and somebody was snoring inside.

"Hey, there, friend!" called Kuzmin loudly. "You'll sleep through the Day of Judgment!"

The driver came to life, got out of the cab, blew his nose, wiped it on the edge of his peasant's coat and only then did he ask, "You want a cab?"

"That's right," said Kuzmin.

"Where to?"

Kuzmin named the street.

"It's a long way," said the driver uneasily. "Up the hill. It'll cost you at least twenty-five kopecks." He pulled on the reins

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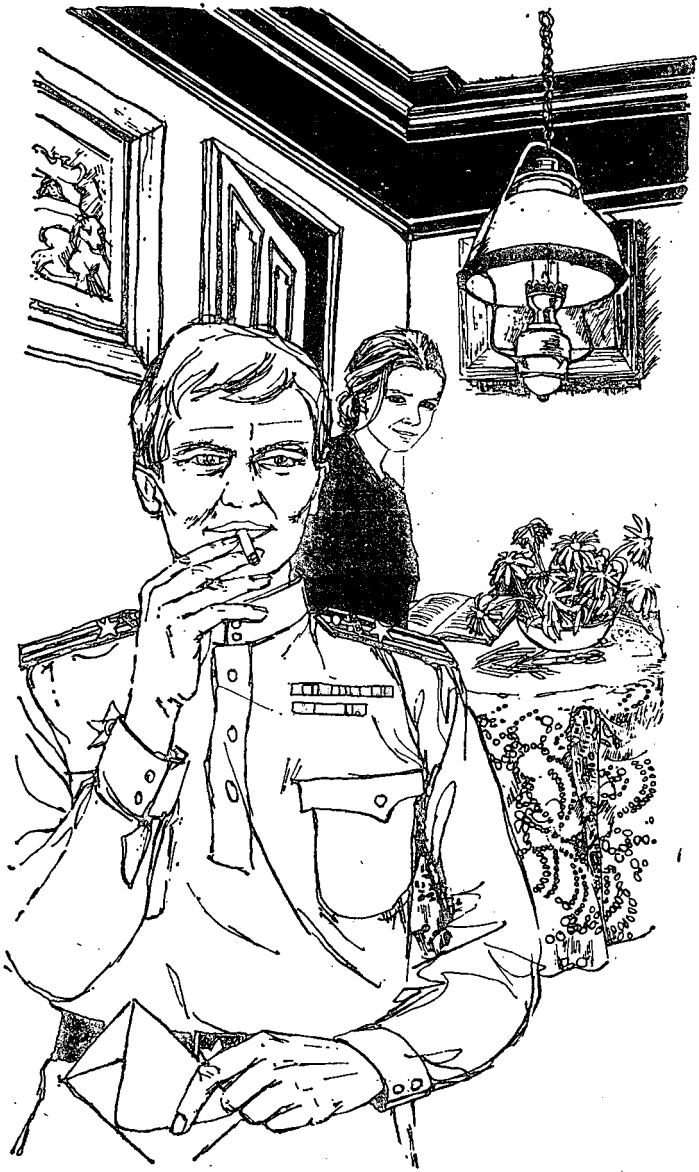

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and smacked his lips. The droshky moved reluctantly along the dark road.

"Are you the only cabman in Navoloky?"

"There's two of us. We're both getting on a bit. The others are at the front. Who is it you're going to?"

"Bashilova."

"I know," said the driver quickly, turning round. "Olga Andreevna, Doctor Andrei Petrovich's daughter. Came from Moscow last year, moved into the father's house. He died two years ago and that's their house . . ."

The droshky swayed and clattered and then lurched out of a hole in the road.

"Better not turn round," advised Kuzmin. "Keep your eye on the road."

"It's a road, all right!" muttered the driver. "It's a terror in the daytime. At night you can't even see the holes."

He stopped talking. Kuzmin lit a cigarette and leaned back in the depth of the droshky. The rain drummed on the roof. In the distance dogs were barking. There was a smell of fennel, of wet fences, of river dampness. "Must be about one o'clock," thought Kuzmin and indeed, at that moment, from somewhere a cracked bell in a church tower struck one.

"If I could stay here for my whole leave," thought Kuzmin, "the air itself would be a good cure. I'd soon get over the effects of my wound. I could take a room in a cottage looking on to a garden. On a night like this, with the window wide open, I could lie wrapped up and listen to the rain pattering on the burdock."

"Would you be the husband, then?" asked the driver.

Kuzmin did not answer. The driver thought that the soldier had not heard him but he did not dare ask again. "Must be the husband," the driver decided. "And they say she left him before the war. A pack of lies, I expect.

"Hey, you devil!" he shouted and lashed the scraggy horse with the reins. "You're not on a pleasure trip."

Kuzmin was thinking how stupid it was being behind time like this and arriving here late at night. And Bashilov, his neighbour in the ward, why should he have asked him to hand the letter to his wife personally, just because he knew he was passing Navoloky? He would have to wake people up and God knows what they would think!

Bashilov was an officer, tall, sarcastic. A great talker. Before making some cutting remark he would smile silently. Prior to his call-up he had been an assistant film producer and every

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evening he would talk to the other patients in the ward about American films. The wounded men liked his stories. They looked forward to them and were surprised at his memory. He had very clear-cut and forthright opinions about people, events and books and he would ridicule anyone who disagreed with him. But he had a cunning way of ridiculing people, making jokes and insinuations, and the person he had been making fun of would only realise an hour or so later what had happened and would think of a really biting reply when, of course, it was too late.

The day before Kuzmin left, Bashilov handed him a letter for his wife and for the first time Kuzmin noticed an embarrassed smile on his face. And then, in the night, Kuzmin heard Bashilov tossing and turning in his bunk and blowing his nose. "Maybe he's not so hard. I believe he's crying. He must love her—a lot."

All the next day Bashilov did not leave Kuzmin's side. He kept looking at him, gave him a present of an Italian water bottle and just before Kuzmin left they drank together a bottle of wine which Bashilov had hidden away.

"Why do you look at me like that?" asked Kuzmin.

"My dear major, you're a good man," answered Bashilov. "You could have been an artist."

"I'm a surveyor," said Kuzmin, "and by nature surveyors are also artists."

"Why?"

"Because they're wanderers," said Kuzmin vaguely.

"Exiles, wanderers, poets," recited Bashilov ironically, "who yearned for something, but nothing did achieve."

"Who wrote that?"

"Voloshin. But that's beside the point. I look at you because I envy you. That's all."

"Why should you envy me?"

Bashilov twirled his glass, leaned back in his chair and gave a sly smile. They were sitting at a small wicker table at the end of a corridor in the hospital. Outside the young trees bent before the wind, the leaves rustled and the dust rose. From over the river a rain cloud was blowing towards the town.

"Why should I envy you?" said Bashilov and put his red hand on Kuzmin's hand. "I envy you everything. Even your hand. Not the left one but the right one."

"I don't understand," said Kuzmin cautiously removing his hand. He did not like the cold touch of Bashilov's hand but to prevent his noticing this he began to pour out some wine.

"All right, don't understand!" said Bashilov angrily.

He stopped and then, lowering his eyes, said, "If we could

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change places! But, anyway, that's all nonsense. In two days you'll be in Navoloky. You'll see Olga Andreevna. She'll shake you by the hand. And so I envy you. Now do you understand?"

"Well, what about it?" said Kuzmin, embarrassed. "You'll be seeing your wife yourself."

"She's not a wife to me!" replied Bashilov sharply.

"I'm sorry," murmured Kuzmin.

"She's no wife to me!" repeated Bashilov. "She's . . . everything! My whole life! Well, that's enough of that!"

He stood and offered Kuzmin his hand.

"Goodbye. And don't be angry with me. I'm no worse than other men."

The droshky arrived at the dam. It became darker. The old willows sighed dreamily as the rain poured from their leaves. The horse's hoofs resounded on the planks of the bridge.

"It's certainly a long way," sighed Kuzmin. "Wait for me at the house," he told the driver, "I'll be going back to the landing-stage."

"As you say," agreed the driver as he thought to himself, "No, I can see it's not the husband. The husband would be bound to stay a day or two. He's a stranger."

They entered a cobbled road. The cab shook, the iron footboards rattled. They turned into a side road and the wheels ran smoothly over damp sand. Kuzmin was again pondering.

Bashilov envied him and, of course, there was no reason why he should do so. He had simply used the wrong word. On the other hand, after their conversation at the window in the hospital it was Kuzmin who began to envy Bashilov. "Again, is that the right word?" said Kuzmin to himself with some annoyance. He didn't envy. He just had a feeling of regret—regret that, here he was, forty years old and had not yet loved in the way Bashilov had. He was always alone.

For some reason these words came to his mind:

Night and the sound of rain,
An empty garden in a strange town,
And over all a meadow mist,
And so life passes.

Again he had the feeling that he wanted to stay here. He was attracted to small Russian towns where, from your porch, you can see riverside meadows, open countryside and haycarts on the ferryboat. It surprised himself that he should feel so attracted.

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He was brought up in the south, of a seafaring family. From his father he had inherited a passion for exploring, for maps, for wandering. And so he had become a surveyor. And yet he considered that his choice of profession was accidental and in other days he might have been a hunter, a discoverer of new lands or an adventurer. He liked to think of himself in this way but he was mistaken. There was nothing in his character that belonged to people of that kind. Kuzmin was shy, reserved and mild in his relations with people. A few grey hairs gave away his age but nobody looking at the slim, shortish officer would have given him more than thirty years.

At last the cab entered the dark town. Only one house, which must have been the chemist's, showed a blue light at the glass-panelled door. The road went uphill. The driver got down from his box to lighten the horse's load. Kuzmin followed. As he walked a little way behind the cab he suddenly felt how completely strange his life was. "Where am I?" he thought. "In some place called Navoloky, in the backwoods, walking behind a horse striking sparks from its shoes. Somewhere near is an unknown woman to whom I have to hand over an important letter, probably a sad letter, in the middle of the night. Two months ago I was at the front. Poland—the wide, calm Vistula. It seems so strange—and so wonderful!"

They reached the top of the hill. As the driver turned into a side street the clouds began to break up and somewhere in the blackness overhead a star shone. It gleamed in a pond and then faded.

The droshky stopped at a house with an attic.

"We're there!" said the driver. "The bell's at the gate, on the right."

Kuzmin groped and found the wooden handle of the bell and pulled it but no sound came except the squeaking of the rusty wire.

"Pull it harder," came the driver's advice.

Kuzmin pulled again. In the depths of the house a small bell tinkled. But the house was as quiet as before. Apparently nobody was awake.

"Oh, ho, ho . . ." yawned the driver. "It's a wet night and they're sound asleep."

Kuzmin waited and then pulled harder. Steps sounded in the wooden hall. Somebody came to the door, stopped and listened and then a disgruntled voice asked, "Who is it? What d'you want?"

Kuzmin was about to answer but the driver forestalled him.

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"Open up, Martha," he said. "It's somebody for Olga Andreevna. From the front."

"Who's from the front?" The same unfriendly tone came from behind the door. "We're not expecting anybody."

"You're not expecting us but we're here."

The door opened a little, on its chain. Kuzmin spoke into the darkness and said who he was and why he had come.

"Good gracious!" said the frightened woman behind the door. "What a botheration! I'll open in a minute. Olga Andreevna's asleep. Come in and I'll waken her."

The door opened and Kuzmin went into the dark hall.

"There are some steps here," warned the woman in a voice that was now warm and friendly. "Such an awful night for you to be travelling here! Wait a minute and mind how you go. I'll light a lamp. We don't keep a light on at night."

She went away and Kuzmin waited in the hall. From the room came the smell of tea and with it another sweet, pleasant smell. A cat came out, rubbed himself against Kuzmin's legs, miaowed and went back into the dark room as though inviting Kuzmin to follow him.

Through the half-open door came a feeble glimmer of light.

"Please," said the woman.

Kuzmin went in. The woman bowed to him. She was a tall, old woman with a dark complexion. Kuzmin, trying not to make a noise, took off his coat and cap and hung them on the rack near the door.

"Don't worry, Olga Andreevna won't mind if she has to be wakened," smiled the old woman.

"Can you hear the hooters at the landing-stage from here?"

"Can we hear them? My goodness, we can hear them all right. So, you're straight off one steamer on to the next. Here you are. Sit here on the sofa."

The old woman went away and Kuzmin sat on a sofa with a wooden back. He hesitated, then got out a cigarette and began to smoke. He was excited and he did not know why and this annoyed him. He had that feeling that one gets in a strange house at night, a house with its own, different kind of life, full of strangeness and mystery, a life that lies there, like a book left on a table open at the sixty-fifth page. You look at that page and try to guess what the book is about, what kind of book it is. Is it a Turgenev novel with all the trepidations of a girl's love and the sun shining through the thinning lime trees? Or could it perhaps be some bitter story by Katyusha Maslova?

In fact, there was an open book lying on the table. Kuzmin

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stood up and leaning over it, listening to the hasty whispering and the rustling of a dress behind the door, read the long-forgotten words:

> The impossible can come to pass,
> The longest road is shortened
> When from afar we see a flash,
> A glimpse beneath a head scarf.

Kuzmin raised his head and looked round. The low warm room again aroused in him the wish to stay in this small town. Such rooms have their own special, simple comfort, with the hanging lamp over the dining table, the white opaque shade and the antlers above the picture showing a dog at the bedside of a sick girl. Rooms like this make us smile. Everything in them is old-fashioned and belongs to a forgotten past. All the things in the room, even the ashtray made of pink shell, spoke of long-established life. Perhaps this feeling of a settled existence—which Kuzmin had never experienced—had a part in stirring in him the wish to stay here and share the way of life of the inhabitants of the old house, an unhurried existence with its alternation of work and rest, winters and springs, rainy days and sunny days. It was the wish to embark on the stream of life, plain-sailing, free of emotional upsets, when even old age does not frighten or torment—like a summer evening gradually sinking into the darkness of night.

However, besides all the old things, there were others. On the table was a bunch of wild flowers, daisies and ashberries. Apparently they had been picked quite recently. A pair of scissors and the ends of stems were lying on the table.

Next to them, open, lay the book of poems by Blok. And on the piano was a woman's small, black hat, lying on a blue plush photo-album. Far from being old-fashioned, the hat was very much up-to-date. Carelessly thrown on to the table was a small wrist watch with a nickel bracelet. It was noiseless and pointed to half past one. And still there was that perfume, faintly sad, especially at that time of night.

Through one pane of the window which was open, and over some bowls of begonia, a wet lilac bush glistened in the faint light from the window. A light rain whispered in the darkness while heavier drops pattered in the metal gutter.

Kuzmin listened to the sound of the raindrops. The thought came to him that each minute was irrevocable—a thought which has troubled men through the ages—particularly this moment, in

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the night, in a strange house which in a few minutes he would be leaving behind and to which he would never again return.

"Is it old age, or what?" thought Kuzmin and he turned round.

At the door stood a young woman in a black dress. She had obviously dressed in a hurry and her hair was still slightly dishevelled. A strand of hair fell on her shoulder and with an embarrassed smile, keeping her eyes on Kuzmin, she lifted it and pinned it up at the back of her head. Kuzmin bowed.

"Forgive me," said the woman as she held out her hand, "I kept you waiting."

"You are Olga Andreevna Bashilova?"

"Yes."

Kuzmin looked at her. He was surprised by her youth and her deep flashing eyes with their veiled look.

He excused himself for disturbing her and pulled Bashilov's letter from his pocket. She took it, thanked him and, without reading it, put it on the piano.

"Why are we standing?" she said. "Do sit down. Here, at the table. There's more light."

Kuzmin sat down and asked if he might smoke.

"Please do," said the woman. "May I have a cigarette too?"

Kuzmin gave her a cigarette and lit a match. The light from the match lit up her face. Her concentrated gaze and her smooth brow seemed familiar to Kuzmin.

She sat opposite him. He waited for her questions. She said nothing but looked out of the window from where there came the same monotonous sound of the rain.

"Marfusha!" said Olga Andreevna and turned to the door. "Bring the samovar, dear."

"Oh, no, please don't," said Kuzmin. "I mustn't stay. The driver's waiting outside. I only came to hand you the letter and tell you something . . . about your husband."

"Tell me what?" said Olga Andreevna, pulling a daisy from the bunch of flowers and relentlessly tearing off its petals. "He's alive . . . I'm glad."

Kuzmin said nothing.

"Stay," said Olga Andreevna simply, as though she were speaking to an old friend. "We shall hear the hooter. The boat won't leave before dawn, of course."

"Why?"

"Gracious me!" came Marfusha's voice from the next room. "We have a big sandbank below Navoloky and it's dangerous to go that way at night. So the captains wait till morning."

"It's true," confirmed Olga Andreevna. "It's a quarter of an

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hour's walk to the landing-stage if you go by the town park. I'll take you. You can send the driver away. Who brought you? Was it Vassily?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," smiled Kuzmin.

"Timofey brought him," came the information from behind the door. He could hear the rattling of the funnel of the samovar. "You can have some tea at least. You can't just come in from the rain like that and go straight out again."

Kuzmin agreed and went out to the driver and paid him. He took a long time to go, walking round the horse and adjusting its harness.

When Kuzmin went back the table was laid with old blue gold-rimmed cups, a jug of hot milk, honey and a bottle of wine which had already been started on. Marfusha brought in the samovar.

Olga Andreevna apologised for the modest meal. She told Kuzmin that she intended going to Moscow but that in the meantime she was working in the local library at Navoloky. All the time, Kuzmin was expecting her to ask about Bashilov but she made no enquiries and Kuzmin felt a growing embarrassment. He had guessed when he was still in the hospital that there was some estrangement between Bashilov and his wife, and now that she had put the letter on the piano without reading it he was sure of it. He felt that he had failed in his duty to Bashilov and that made him feel guilty. "Of course, she'll read it later," he thought. One thing was clear—the letter to which Bashilov had attached so much importance, and because of which Kuzmin had appeared at this unearthly hour at this house, had ceased to have any importance or interest. In the end he had been of no help to Bashilov and had only landed himself in an awkward situation.

Olga Andreevna, as though reading his thoughts, said, "Don't be annoyed. There's the post and the telegraph—I don't know why he should have put you to this trouble."

"It was no trouble," said Kuzmin hastily and added, after a pause, "On the contrary, it was a pleasure."

"What was a pleasure?"

Kuzmin blushed.

Olga Andreevna repeated her question and looked up. She looked at him steadily, leaning forward, waiting for his answer as though she were trying to guess what he was thinking.

But Kuzmin said nothing.

"What was it that was a pleasure?" she asked again.

"How shall I put it?" said Kuzmin thoughtfully. "It's a very

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special matter. The things we love seldom happen. I don't know about other people, but for myself, anything that's worth while nearly always passes me by. Do you understand?"

"Not very well," answered Olga Andreevna, frowning.

"How should I explain?" said Kuzmin feeling annoyed with himself. "The same thing must have happened to you. From the window of a train you suddenly see a clearing in a birch grove. You see a spider's web in autumn glistening in the sun, and you are caught by a desire to jump out of the moving train and stay in that clearing. But the train moves on. You lean out of the window and look back and all those copses, meadows, rivers, horses and country lanes go speeding away—all our dear Russian land—and you hear a vague ringing. What is ringing, you don't know. The forest, perhaps, or the air. Maybe it's the humming of the telegraph wires or the rails under the train. And all this flashes through your mind in an instant—and you remember it all your life."

Kuzmin stopped. Olga Andreevna pushed a glass of wine towards him.

"Have a drink. It's Riesling."

"All my life," said Kuzmin, and he blushed as he always did when he spoke about himself. "I've waited for just such unexpected, simple things. And whenever I've found them I've been happy. Not for long, but for a little while."

"And you feel that now?" asked Olga Andreevna.

"Yes."

Olga Andreevna looked down.

"Why?" she asked.

"I don't quite know. It's just how I feel. I was wounded at the Vistula and was in hospital. Everybody got letters except me. I just didn't have anybody to write to me. I lay there, thinking, as all the others were thinking, about what was going to happen to me after the war. It was sure to be something wonderful and out of the ordinary. Then I got better and they decided to send me away for a rest to a certain town."

"Which town?" asked Olga Andreevna.

Kuzmin named the town. Olga Andreevna said nothing.

"I took a boat," continued Kuzmin. "Villages on the banks, landing-stages. I felt devilishly lonely. For goodness' sake don't think I'm complaining. There's a lot to be said for solitude. Then Navoloky. I was afraid of falling asleep and passing it. I went out on deck, into the still night, and thought how strange it was that in that darkness covering all Russia, under rain-filled skies, thousands of different people slept peacefully. And that, only

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then, in their sleep, their lives came to a stop. But not for long. Another day would begin weaving the thread of each person's fate. Of yours and of mine. Then I drove here and all the time I was wondering whom I was going to meet."

"And what makes you so happy?" asked Olga Andreevna.

"Well . . ." Kuzmin thought quickly. "Everything's all right." He stopped.

"But why do you stop? Please tell me more."

"What about? I got carried away and said more than I should have."

"About everything," answered Olga Andreevna as though she had not heard his last words. "Whatever you like—though it is all rather strange."

She got up and went to the window and pushed the curtain aside. It was still raining.

"What is so strange?" asked Kuzmin.

"It rains and rains," said Olga Andreevna and turned towards him. "Here you are, a lonely man. And I—I'm lonely too. And meeting like this. And all this conversation—well, is that not strange?"

Kuzmin sat in embarrassed silence. Olga Andreevna went to the calendar and tore off a sheet.

"The twelfth of June. I always forget how many days there are in a year."

"Three hundred and sixty-five."

"I'm twenty-eight. How many days will that be?"

Kuzmin thought and smiled.

"About ten thousand."

"Good. Leave out five thousand for childhood. That means five thousand times I've waited for something wonderful to happen. Waiting—the way everybody waits—every blessed day. But nobody could tell me, no fortune-teller, which day in the end would be the most memorable."

She looked at Kuzmin with shining eyes and asked, "I'm talking nonsense, am I not?"

Kuzmin wanted to answer that it was not at all nonsense but from somewhere in the darkness of the wet night, from down the hill, came the sound of the ship's hooter.

"Ah, well," said Olga Andreevna as though relieved. "That's the hooter!"

Kuzmin got up. Olga Andreevna did not move.

"Wait," she said calmly. "Let's sit down before you set off. You know the old custom."

Kuzmin sat down again. Olga Andreevna also sat, pondering,

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even turning her face away from him. Kuzmin, looking at her high shoulders, her thick hair pinned up at the smooth curve of her neck, thought that, but for Bashilov, he would never leave this town. He would stay till the end of his leave, he would live here, excited by the knowledge that beside him lived this lovely, sad woman—living and waiting for her most memorable day.

Olga Andreevna got up. In the small hall Kuzmin helped her on with her raincoat. She put on a head scarf.

They went out and walked silently along the dark street.

"It will soon be dawn," said Olga Andreevna. Above the far bank of the river the watery sky was turning blue. Kuzmin noticed that Olga Andreevna was trembling.

"Are you cold?" he asked anxiously. "There's no need for you to go with me. I could find my way."

"No, I'll go with you," answered Olga Andreevna shortly.

The rain stopped but drops were still falling from the roofs and pattering on the plank pavement. At the end of the street was the town park. The gate was open and they were soon walking along paths through thick neglected bushes. The park smelt of the chill night and of wet sand. It was an old park, darkened by tall lime trees. The trees were now withered and exhaled a faint smell. Once only a breeze passed through the park, filling it with noise as if a heavy shower had poured down on it and then immediately stopped.

At the end of the park was a steep bank running down to the river and beyond the bank a rainy expanse heralding the dawn, the dim lights of buoys, mist, and all the sadness of summer rain.

"How shall we get down?" asked Kuzmin.

"Come here!"

Olga Andreevna turned along a path leading straight to the bank where a wooden stairway led down into the darkness.

"Give me your hand!" said Olga Andreevna. "Many of the steps are rotten."

Kuzmin gave her his hand and, very carefully, they began the descent. The grass which was growing between the steps was wet from the rain.

When they reached the bottom they stopped. They could now see the landing-stage and the green and red lights of the steamer. There was a hiss of steam. Kuzmin's heart tightened at the realisation that here and now he was parting from this woman, a stranger to him and yet so close to him, and he had nothing to say to her—nothing at all! He could not even thank her for crossing his path, for giving him her small, firm hand in its damp glove, for leading him carefully down the rickety stairs and for

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saying to him softly, "Bend down," every time a wet branch hanging over the railings nearly brushed his face.

"Let's say goodbye here," said Olga Andreevna. "I shan't go any farther."

Kuzmin glanced at her. She was looking at him from under her scarf with anxious, serious eyes. Was it possible that at this moment everything would recede into the past and would remain only as a memory in her life and in his?

Olga Andreevna held out her hand to Kuzmin. Kuzmin kissed it and smelt that same faint perfume which he had caught in the dark room as the rain whispered outside.

When he raised his head Olga Andreevna said something, but so quietly that Kuzmin did not catch it. He thought perhaps she had said simply, "It's no use . . ." She may have said something else, but from the river came the angry call of the steamer complaining about the dreadful morning, about its wandering life in rain and fog.

Kuzmin ran down to the water's edge without looking back, along the landing-stage smelling of bast and tar, entered the steamer and then climbed up to the empty deck. The steamer started to pull away, her paddles working slowly ahead. Kuzmin walked to the stern and looked towards the bank and the stairway. Olga Andreevna was still there. It was scarcely daylight and it was difficult to see her clearly. Kuzmin raised his hand but Olga Andreevna did not reply.

The boat moved farther and farther away, throwing long waves on to the sandy shores and rocking the buoys, and the willow bushes along the shore answered the strokes of the steamer's paddles with a nasty rustling.

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Translated by Andrew Thomson.

Konstantin Paustovsky was born in 1893, and went to school in Kiev. After graduating at Moscow University, he took up journalism. In 1927, encouraged by Maxim Gorky, he started to write the novels, short stories and critical essays which have won him such distinction among living Russian writers. His life, spanning two world wars and the Russian Revolution, has provided rich material also for the autobiography on which he is still engaged. Two volumes of this, *Childhood and Schooldays* and *Slow Approach of Thunder* (The Harvill Press), have been published in Britain in English translations.

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THE END OF THE PIER

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ONE afternoon my father threw a red and grey grand piano into the sea. Two railway porters, and a cook named Field, helped. The piano wasn't easy to poke through one of the Kasbah's broad upper windows but it made a fantastic slap on the water, and presently sped away from the end of the pier, towards the great shipping lanes. For a long time we could watch it through Granddad Boullemier's field-glasses, closing with the *United States*, then a very new liner. Field, a Bedfordshire man who used to creep along railway lines to bludgeon unwary pheasants out of season, said the loss of the piano was a sad moment. My father, Calver Theodore Strowbridge, said it wasn't. He pointed out to Field the £2,000 Compton Melotone electronic organ, still banked up with corrugated paper, which would take the piano's place on the Kasbah's stage.

This was in 1955 and Dad employed a succession of electronic organists which didn't peter out until 1960. They included a woman called Mary Bishop whose head I once thought I saw resting in a glass pickle dish, and they ended with Al Oldson

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who had a seizure one Gala Night, and first wet on the Melotone, then smashed it up.

But, to talk about my father's courtship of the Kasbah, and his efforts to take a lot of money from various entertainments in it, slot machines, hot dinners, roller-skating, I must go back to the end of the War when the Royal Naval Signals left. They used to scratch filthy words on the iron fantails of the balcony, and they climbed up inside the tall dome to hide packets of Weights they had stolen.

For years afterwards there were legends of how many hundred Weights must be left up there inside the dome, a seventy-five-foot climb. It was in 1949, I think, that a tram-conductor named Barney Beaney—curiously, a brother of one of the men who helped push out the piano—almost fell to his death attempting

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the climb. But he crept back with sickness all over his green shirt and black serge waistcoat, and only a single packet of ten Ardath to show for it; with the gift certificates missing.

Before the war, there used to be a pierrot show in the Kasbah. Old pierrots who didn't have dressing-rooms or a lavatory. When the sailors slept in the Kasbah, they built an excellent lavatory behind the stage, then put a chest of drawers in it and screened it with plasterboard covered by out-of-date candyfloss posters.

The plasterboard had a name chalked on it: Sergeant Swindells. Somehow, Dad never got around to rubbing this out and it stayed sharp and white even when he sub-let the lavatory, which was a coffin-shaped room with high, stained-glass windows, to a couple of palmists in the lean years of 1951–3. The palmists were named Madame Varvara and Madame Irena Rose and they held consultations in the lavatory after cleverly masking not only the pan and the cistern and the ornate toilet-roll holder, but also their own little Primus stove.

The pier outside smelled of engine oil and shellfish. In time, Dad made it smell of old chips, the slippery stuff with which you encourage dance-floors, and food and ice-cream cornet cartons, wilting in the sun. In the Tuck Corner, Ossie Haresign added the succulence of rock, toffee-apples and his own considerable armpits. But, as a child, I imagined that the pier must once have been very nice-smelling. There were early prints of it hanging in the station booking-office. It seemed to have once had beautifully scrubbed planks and to have been greatly admired by couples in long coats tiptoeing down it, and by ocean-going yachts. The town was just a woody hill then. One imagined pierrots free of disease, dancing to work down those white planks; gentle warships brushing the florin-shaped pierhead.

But my father came to the pier at a bad time; he found it black-looking and full of surly porters. The town guide now described it as an industrial pier but did not remark how popular for suicides it had become. Occasionally, a King or a Duke would get off his barge at Commodore Mew's jetty, but one always had the impression that the crew of the barge had mistaken it for Cowes. The pier was a big, evil boil, covered by a hundred-year shadow of barnacles; possessing a diesel tramway and steam railway and a piermaster called Ted Timms who was to be found dead in bed. Oh, and a public address system to speak to the ferries from Portsmouth.

At low tide, when the large, grey fish lay and ate the water bubbling from Dad's potato-peeler, you could actually see that

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most of the pier's supports were broken stumps. Divers used to go down to inspect them, and climb back holding a relaxed lobster or a hermit crab to throw at the nearest child. And when the tide was really low, you might spot a couple of heads down among those dangerous stumps; prawn-gatherers, who were able to chase prawns although a ferry was docking not ten seconds walk away.

It's hard not to emphasise the ferries as, through each summer, they brought thousands of dirty, troublesome day-trippers, usually right past my father's café doors. Ferries docked at five to and twenty-five past the hour. Nice boats with yellow funnels and plaques describing their part in Dunkirk. But when they stopped and threw open their scoops, a dreadful warmth of melted ice cream came out.

They came in, tilted madly towards the pier, with telegraph bells ringing and the captain standing on the bridge in the wrong perspective. There would be scarcely a sound except when a bell rang or the wet cables whipped the dock to be snatched up by a hundred awkward-natured men in jerseys. I used to watch them because their caps were knocked and kneaded so crazily. I shared the post-war child's interest in peaked caps. The porters' were not a bit like the immaculate cap worn by Commodore Mew, that stout and righteous navigator who crushed pier and street photographers with his eye.

Commodore Mew's pleasure boats were converted small ferries with the toilets removed. He used to take people to see the Redwing yachts at Bembridge or, sometimes, late at night, to see the rich people being sick in the rocky water during Cowes Week. His fleet was called The Pleasure Line. On my first real day at the Kasbah, Commodore Mew was extremely busy taking boats full of people to see the British Fleet.

It was Coronation Year and the Queen was somewhere about. Battleships were left around in an irritating haze and an artist on the Kasbah's sunroof was trying hard to paint them. Presently he borrowed Granddad Boullemier's field glasses to try to see the Queen.

Already, Dad must have been wishing he hadn't leased the Kasbah; but he kept reassuring himself that there was still a fortune to be made from luncheon-meat sandwiches and papery-flavoured fancy cakes. He was still buying up Edwardian slot-machines to be arranged in the Kasbah's big main hall under the dome, which he also saw in alternating dreams as a ballroom on Carnival Night and a self-service cafeteria. He thought the balcony around the rim of the dome would be a good sitting-out

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place for tea-dancers; there was an upstairs restaurant facing the best of the shipping; kitchens with great banks of fish-friers and service lifts in which rats sometimes rode up and down. Possibly one day, Dad thought, Chapples' Gold Medal Cordials would be driven out of the Mariner, a bar snuggling against the Kasbah and tended by a woman who liked crouching among the beer engines with her chamberpot.

Obviously, Fleet Review Day was to be the test of Dad's organisation; himself, quarts of hot gravy over cold roast beef, nine waitresses, Chef, no mechanics for the machines, old Fred Ball, (The Excuse King, Dad called him lovingly), doubling on both rifle-range and restaurant bar. The sun was still drying off when the pier began to bulge with trippers, not all of them dirty ones. Dad was offering ten-guinea seats in the open windows of the restaurant upstairs and on the sunroof, with field-glasses and a smoked salmon buffet, running for the three days the Fleet was there.

It was also the first day he used his public address system, and the first day Ossie Haresign, in the Tuck Corner, used his. To please the Queen, whose picture was on everything greasy in a bag, the town was hot and the water shone; the pier and the streets were filled with red, white and blue packets of Smith's Crisps, and sticks of striped rock which the yellow, black and yellow wasps sucked vigorously. And I was there, worrying the artist.

I was ten, and knocking around in a pushchair, which various waitresses had been instructed to leave anywhere the sun was. It was to be the first day I could remember beginning and ending at the Kasbah. Before that, I had only impressions of heat on concrete or trying to get our liver and roan spaniel down the ferry's gangway when we first arrived from Huntingdon. For about two years, the Kasbah was just something you went to after school, riding in the loudspeaker van, or something you saw stretched out in lights, from our flat in Dover Street.

But, as it happened, the day before, Stuart Hull, the son of a mathematics master, had dared me to jump off the seawall at Cove Rise, where the pedal boats were arranged. I jumped, and crashed on a boulder. Stuart's athletic mother carried me back to Dover Street and, though I yelped half the night, I had fully recovered the next day, except for the broken ankle. Dad took me out early and bought me a pop-gun from Larkinson's, and a clockwork tugboat I called a launch and would not be corrected.

It was a very pleasant day I spent, for a good many people

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were more concerned about me than about looking at the Fleet. The artist gave up the telescope and it remained with me. God knows where the pushchair had been dredged up from, but it was taken up and down the main stairs at my slightest behest, and even lowered into Commodore Mew's best boat, for a look around the Fleet. My cousin Roger and I took big lunches of salad and prawns and tinned strawberries; we watched the queues for the special two-shilling sausage meal on the sunroof, the distant, punching sound of the electric pin-tables mixing lazily with the warring loudspeaker announcements of Ossie Haresign and my father's large and independent voice.

My father said, "We are Still serving today's Special two shilling hot Lunch or Salad on the sunroof on the First Floor, where Tea, Coffee, Minerals and Light Refreshments may also be Obtained. The entrance is on the Tramway Station."

Ossie's voice said, "Now come along ladies and gentlemen we'll serve you straight away all flavours of rock, lettered right through peppermint, greengage," (did he mean lime?) "or pineapple bars and boxes of chocolate, boiled sweets toffees toffee apples all very nice souvenirs you've plenty of time before the boat leaves". But generally it was on the point of leaving.

The Railway's voice said, "All passengers for the town, please turn right, across the pier and down on the trams. Train passengers to the left for Brading, Sandown, Shanklin, Wroxall and Ventnor". The speaker was an ailing Welshman, who wore his uniform and buttons swaggerishly, like a Hussar.

Trade stayed grand and the bottles clashed in the beer skips all afternoon. When dusk started, there were still old Cockneys eating ice-cream out of tubs in the queues. The tragic little barker who sold toffee apples and Banjo bars from a trolley was passing from one queue's end to another, but Ossie had shut the rock shop and gone for drinks at the station buffet with his wife, Janie, and a close-looking former GI called Humbly, who drove one of the Railway's Lister trucks.

But Dad's announcements spoke on and on; for he was now selling sevenpenny bags of rock salmon and chips, taking every hand available, except for the few waitresses needed to minister to old people, pasted to their ten-guinea window seats. The Fleet put on its lights. Dad permitted himself a glass of lager in the Mariner, the bar he wanted to take over. He stood by its black stove, flushed and feeling suddenly rich and on top of the business, talking about having a swim later from Commodore Mew's jetty. A handsome man, my father, with black hair and a widow's peak: he was wearing a nicely-cut alpaca coat.

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Then, barking excitedly, Ossie Haresign appeared at the open door, most of his trouser buttons undone and his hands covered in machine-oil. He stared in for a little while, then walked away, returned and stared again. The enmity between Dad and himself had been given the chance to ripen, as their voices had mingled over the air. Moreover, Dad had sold a little rock himself that day and Ossie who had offered no special two-shilling sausage lunches, nor ten-guinea smoked salmon concessions, was now goggle-eyed and cross.

Ossie let the people in the Mariner know that they were a lot of useless bastards: Dad, Fred Ball, Marjorie, the thieving waitress overseer, Chef and a man who had been driven from his all-night fishing perch by the queues and wasn't interested in Fleets. Possibly Ossie was not being wholly inaccurate. He advanced a little way into the bar, knocking over quite a lot of stout bottles on the floor. Then, in a flash, Dad was chasing Ossie round the stove; and when he caught him, he took hold of Ossie's grey shirt, and ripped it from his limbs. It made a sort of "pat". "A—a—h," Dad said, his eyes also bulging with temper.

Then, it is said, Ossie ran out on to the pierhead, and towards a bit of water called The Triangle, shut in by the boards of the railway station, the Kasbah and his own rock shop; the place where the divers went down and Tony, one of the tram-drivers, dropped a big net every day, between journeys.

Along the piece of railing which ran between the Kasbah and Ossie's, there was a ledge containing twelve simple cup and ball machines on which everyone lost, dating from the year 1906. Six belonged to Dad, six to Ossie. When people went to Dad, asking him to mend one of Ossie's, he usually did. When they asked Ossie to mend one of Dad's, he said, "Shove off!"

So, late on Fleet Review night, Ossie ran to the ledge, lifted the first of Dad's cup and ball machines and put it directly into The Triangle. Then he locked himself in his Austin Princess and began to retch. Dad spoke for a while through the car's smoked windows, then went and ordered brandy and Apollinaris. Next day, his solicitor, Mr. Herberts, sent Ossie a note, politely asking for a cheque for £230, which Ossie sent by return. After that, Dad climbed down when the prawn people were out, and pulled up the machine, oiled and replaced it. When people asked Ossie to mend that one, he used to go very white and silent, and did not actually refuse.

Dad became good at going down the ladder. He also brought up a lot of Ossie's ice-cream tins, which had no business to be

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thrown away, as there was a deposit on them, and ice-cream companies at that time were very readily offended. Dad used the tins to empty his machines. Ossie, who wore a gorgeous variety of sunburst ties and pastel trousers, who sold Hundreds and Thousands off points and was rumoured to have cockroaches in his rock bananas, seemed not to notice.

But one morning, when I was still in that chair, and gulls were unstringing a flounder's warty corpse on the pier concrete, a man stole into the tea-bar. He asked for Dad and told him he represented Goodwife's Dairies Ice Cream of Lake, and was enquiring why their tins were being used to empty machines.

Dad told him, "There's a skinny swine called Ossie at the Tuck Corner who keeps throwing them in the sea".

"Oh, I see", the man said. "He happens to be my brother-in-law."

"In that case", Dad said, looking at him, "you're a skinny swine as well."

The man from Goodwife's Dairies Ice Cream did not seem offended, being very short and dressed in a heather-mixture suit and tartan tie with a silver thread passing through it. He and my father walked down the steps from the Kasbah's wooden plaza and towards the Tuck Corner where Ossie was standing in a ruminative kind of way, a bunch of keys round his neck like a garland.

The man from Goodwife's Dairies Ice Cream and Ossie both immediately put their hands on their hips. It was another gorgeous and hazy morning and workmen were striking the pier's iron studs with a cheery sound; draymen were expected.

"What about these tins?" said the visitor.

"What is it?" said Ossie.

"He says that you been slinging them and—", even if they were brothers-in-law, the man from Goodwife's Ice Cream grew suddenly angry with Ossie—"you know I've got written instructions about returning returnable tins. You know there's a deposit on them, sir. What's the harm in that for Christ's sake, Ossie?"

"It's the kids", Ossie said in his agreeable voice—a surprising thing about him. Then he spoiled it by sucking his teeth lustily, and turning to my father. "Next time my wife's out in public, don't insult her; try remembering where you are and not acting as if you'd been dragged up."

For once, Ossie had reason to be aggrieved. A night or two earlier, at the Starboard Club, when the doors were open to the lights of the remainder of the Fleet, Ossie had grown mellow and

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had tried to be pally, weaving his way through dancers, saying to Dad, "Come on old darling, let's bury the hatchet." Dad, after a bad day discovering just how well Marjorie the waitress could pinch things, had replied, "Certainly, bend down." There had been no truce.

"You think you've got education, but you haven't," Ossie told him. After a few more words, he threw a fawn little fist at Dad's head, which was easily checked.

"Don't do it, Os!" The man from Goodwife's Ice Cream backed away, his head wagging insanely; and then Ossie paced after him, swinging and striking him in the pleat where his abdomen was.

The attacked one gulped, or rather, golped, and cried, "I know nothing about all that. I just want to know why all our returnable tins are being slung overboard". Whereat Ossie, to cries of encouragement from the workmen at the studs, lashed with his foot at Dad's knee and gambolled into his shop, where he flung the bolt to and turned round the "Closed" notice.

Hopping, my father put out a hand to support himself on the revolving stand where Ossie displayed postcards, all of them dirty, some of them dating from the early nineteen-twenties.

"Don't you damage that," Ossie screamed at him through the shop glass.

"It is private property," the man from Goodwife's Ice Cream added.

My father, blackening, turned to him. "Shove off, old son, or I'll put your tins where they deserve to go. Do me a favour and sling your hook, old lad".

"I know my rights".

My father lost his temper and harried Ossie's brother-in-law to the railing at the edge of The Triangle, where, instead of dodging away again, and on to the tram, he mounted the rail and eased himself down the first steps of the iron ladder. Dad pretended to pursue him and he went down another six. Dad did not pursue him and, with a cry of panic, he slid the rest of the rungs and ended waist high in the inky low-tide.

It was then that a great voice bawled out, "Leave my brother-in-law alone. Who the hell do you think this is?" It was Ossie's voice, crisp and a little evangelical, through his loudspeaker. My father stood and watched, then he ran to his own microphone. Both their voices began to argue, like gods.

"Don't you tell me what to do."

"Don't you steal my bloody tins."

"Don't you kick me."

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"Don't you persecute train passengers turn left, passengers for the town please turn right and down the pier on the trams."

There was a stupendous "Christ Almighty" from Ossie, and a number of clicks followed, like alarmed dental plates in both loudspeakers. Then they began announcing at the same time, which made an utterly shapeless gabble. The head of Ossie's brother-in-law never reappeared at the rail. Dad went on using the ice cream tins which Ossie went on ditching. The representative may have been drowned or trapped; for even at low tide, the pier's underneath was perilous and black-sanded. If he found his way to the shore, he was an exceedingly resourceful man.

Ossie, though he was to become a celebrated juke box king, only played at machine-minding in those days. He thought people who discovered them not working were liars, and dropped hints to that effect. But my father was mechanically brilliant and found a deep joy in maintaining the two hundred and seventy penny machines he had inside the Kasbah. A good many of these were electric pin-tables, dating from the nineteen-thirties, with backcloths of hula girls dressed like Anna May Wong, or of space cities with curiously dated rocket ships, all looking like Cord motor cars, darting here and there. If you scored 188,000 or more, which you didn't, Fred Ball would come across from the rifle-range with a cardboard box for you. Inside it, there used to be one toffee.

The pin-tables formed the pews. Along one wall stood Fred Ball's green and yellow rifle-range and a change box in which a girl named Margaret spent most of her days writing "Butch Salter is a very nice boy" on bits of Players packets. Facing Ossie's rock shop, there was a set of five folding doors, with a cup and ball machine between each set. The stage was unused. It would not be widened until the late nineteen-fifties, but on the left wall, between the stage and the steps leading to Sergeant Swindell's lavatory, there was something called The Copper Mine, where you had to raise up a plate of pennies, through a ribcage of madly joggling arms. If a penny or two did stay on, a metal arrow indicated a notice saying "Excellent" but you didn't get the pennies.

Nearby, on a platform, was an iron sailor, dressed in Dreadnought style. "Try Your Strength" a notice invited. The idea was to force back the sailor's outstretched arms. No-one used to see the wires trailing out of his iron duck trousers, until they had been hurled back several feet by a swift, fierce electric shock.

In between the stage and the windows facing the tramlines and

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the town, stood a row of blue things on stilts, called Mutioscopes. A swiftly turned handle made pictures flicker; the effect was one of fast-moving newspaper cuttings and people were generally disappointed in what they saw. Lupino Lane was making up his face in the one entitled *Closed Doors in Tangiers*. *River Nude* showed the late Harry Lauder whacking his cane about in some long-forgotten routine.

But others among the machines were brilliant and valuable. *The Uninvited* contained a wax miser, counting bars of gold. In a succession of horrid little pinging sounds, skulls and spectres stuck their heads out of hearths and cupboards, then, finally, a picture of Winston Churchill above the little fireplace, swung back to reveal a witch eating a baby.

Another creepy thing was called *See Him Sweat*, a green machine on a high plinth, all reportedly made from a shell case. Your penny raised the black wall of a dungeon where, surrounded by dolls dressed as guards, a cut-out model of Adolf Hitler sat on a pot.

In the hockey machines, a refugee of a goalkeeper slumped hopelessly at each end, and the metal balls rolled away for the next game like field guns on trucks. There was also a very big boxing machine which needed two pennies to work it. The boxers had their painted hair parted in the middle, and their painted trunks hung down to their calves. Behind them, the fight scene was a little masterpiece. Row upon row of men sat in perfect evening dress; there was an MC with sidewhiskers; details, right down to carnations and cigars. The machine was either American or French, and to-day antiquarians would bid hotly for it. But then, it wasn't interesting, and stayed out of order on the tram station, for a couple of summers.

All of our machines were the pasture of Tone, a hungry boy of twelve from a subterranean boarding-house up the town, whose pride and vocation was the swindling of machines. And he had one of those trumpet-shaped mouths with which to profess his innocence. It was his custom to go to the cup and ball machines and slide a knife under the emptying tray, to tweak out pennies. Or he used to whip the handles around to try to have two pennies back instead of one.

Tone's swindling was strictly a cash affair, but my father aroused in him a new spirit of bravado and improvisation which the new, electrical machines of the Sandown White City could never stir up. Tone used to crouch and wait; then he would spring underneath one of our pin-tables to unplug it. Finally, my father caught him at it and kicked his trousers so hard that

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Tone straightened up immediately and splintered the pin-table's hardboard underbelly with his head.

Dad, in a way, rather liked Tone. I fancy he regarded him rather as a fisherman does a sinister old trout, staying in the bottle water under a bridge. Yet no trout has ever threatened legal action as often and powerfully as Tone threatened it. One day, he was swindling a machine called The Cash Leap, and it collapsed on him, crushing his chest. Dad pillowed his head, covered him up and then went with him to the hospital.

He visited Tone twice after that, once going with a pile of "Kit Carson" comics and once with an entire display box of chocolate toffees. Tone recovered and returned to our machines. On his second day out of hospital, Dad led him by his ear to the tram and Tone threatened legal action.

Summer 1953 began to end and still Dad did not fully realise how thoroughly and joyfully he was being robbed by other waitresses apart from Marjorie, by Chef, and by Nell Niblett, an ostensibly trusty still-room maid who wiped her ears on the tea towels sometimes. Dad found out later that the relations of all these would sit in the Albany Hotel at the town end of the pier on Friday nights, waiting for their rations. They were cross if there was marge.

As the hot weather ended, Commodore Mew laid up all his boats and people playing the machines dwindled to a few of my school friends, who looked out for Dad and raised their caps for free tea and free pennies. It was decided to pay everyone off except Mrs. Cook in the tea-bar, who was crusty but honest. Dad went upstairs and, by himself, began to clean the fish-friers. From beneath one, he drew a vast storing tray of pork chops, hidden skilfully, but never collected; and from beneath another, he drew a stinking but entire salmon.

In September and October, the sea around the pier looks as if cuttlefish have deposited it. The number of all-night fishermen grows. Their black bicycles with the baskets in front, and Oxo tins full of ragworm, are piled everywhere.

Ferries creep in with no captains to be seen and only the Railway loudspeaker takes note of them. In 1953's September and October, Ossie and Janie were in Ramsgate, staying with Ossie's mother, who lived, it was said, with a burglar. My mother had already run away from the Dover Street flat and I was in boarding-school, not liking Dad much. He was considering where to store his two hundred and seventy machines for the winter.

He decided on a loft, provided by Agger, the signwriter. This

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was an accomplished letterer who would figure largely in the efforts Dad later made to turn the Kasbah into something rather more gracious. But at that time, he had done no more work for Dad than a number of red notices on yellow, warning: "Only food purchased here may be eaten on these premises" and one other self-supporting board reading "Drink Shandy".

Mr. Agger was hardly ever seen out of the company of a Mr. Morrison of Castle Road. They shared a way of limply smoking cigarettes in mouths which seemed to be taking part in some wearisome conspiracy to make them both cough in a luxury of internal green. But Mr. Agger was accomplished in the painting of signs and in adding things, like wildly steaming hot-dogs, which drew holidaymakers' attention. The store he offered Dad was at the summit of George Street which, from the pierhead, seemed drawn vindictively at right-angles. Furthermore, it had cobbles.

The two hundred and seventy machines, the Mutioscopes, the jukebox, (then it was called a Melody Maker and stuffed with Guy Mitchell records), the crackling iron sailor, *See Him Sweat, The Uninvited*, everything from which Tone had wrung cash so lovingly, must be herded up the pier, three-quarters of a mile, through the gates, past the gang-torn arcade of Alf Forrest and the char-a-banc bays, up the cobbles. To begin this, Dad mustered Fred Ball, a frail whisker-wriggler, a young mechanic named "Fluff" Fry, Butcher Salter, change-desk Margaret's favourite, and three pieces of aged plank, lashed together by Dad, and set upon two furniture castors.

Our team also had the advantage of a fairly new Morris Minor van, purchased from S. Johncox, the town's leading wet fish dealer, and a Town Councillor. Fluff Fry had been directed to paint the van green and had done so well until he reached the last bit: S. Johncox, Phone 2577, when he found he was running out of paint. He just managed to blot out everything except "Phone", which stayed. People walking the pier that afternoon looked strange when they saw it; and even more strange at the spectacle of two young men and one aged one, balancing one leg of a twenty-seven-year-old electric pin-table on such a tiny and knotty trolley, steering it at speed, so that the castors would not be trapped between the pier's planks. The van saying "Phone" prowled either in front or behind, blocked with cables and cabinets, driven by a petrified Butch Salter.

The move occupied a Thursday and Dad directed it lovingly, as a man who shifts concrete up the garden to build a greenhouse. As the day advanced, the faces of the men opening and

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closing the gates set hard. There were a thousand special hindrances. *See Him Sweat* was the greatest of these, although The Copper Mine was bigger, the sailor was heavier and The Automatic Palmist, (with a style like a letter home from Sebastopol), turned out to be the wickedest. The tilt of the trolley was so crazy that her gown somehow worked half off, so that all the bus-conductors on The Esplanade could see her frightful secret. Green nipples.

A good many of the machines fitted into the van, but *See Him Sweat* could not be taken from its column and was, at the same time, almost impossible to balance because of its weight. It was one of the last to be moved. By this time, poor Fred had gone home to St. Helens, fearing a hernia, Dad was busy with subtle stacking and Butch and Fluff Fry had to take it alone, tired and mocked.

They dropped *See Him Sweat* on the approach to George Street, the gentle bit before the hill, right outside a Post Office, kept by two correct old men. There was a most frantic clash, a ragged cheer from Tone's scouts; the hinges of the dungeon front parted and the mechanism was somehow jolted into working, although it was face-upwards on the cobbles, exposing Hitler on his pot.

The machinery stopped, a taximan named Ben Filmore contributed a couple of jabs with his toe-cap so that it would perform again. Fluff Fry threatened Filmore and the remainder of the taximen threatened him. After a lot of conversation, the machine was back on the trolley and ready to climb George Street. It was wheeled five yards and then dropped again.

The curious thing was that Fluff and Butch just left it; they abandoned everything where it lay, just level with a poster for Vitbe bread. They went up to Mr. Agger's, Butch carrying the trolley under one arm, as he was a powerful youth. They told Dad that *See Him Sweat* had been knocked about a bit. As he was busy stacking nine machines he had called The Allwin De Luxe, Dad did not shriek at them but he assumed they had brought up the damaged machine or taken it back to the Kasbah, where he kept a bench, a drill and a million or so nuts and bolts in Log Cabin tobacco tins.

The masquerade was continued when Dad drove the van back down parallel Union Street, thus missing the sight of *See Him Sweat* being plundered by Tone's friends. The front, and soon the whole cabinet, vanished. Dad didn't find out about the loss until long afterwards because Butch was only helping for the day, and the following morning, when Fluff Fry telephoned to

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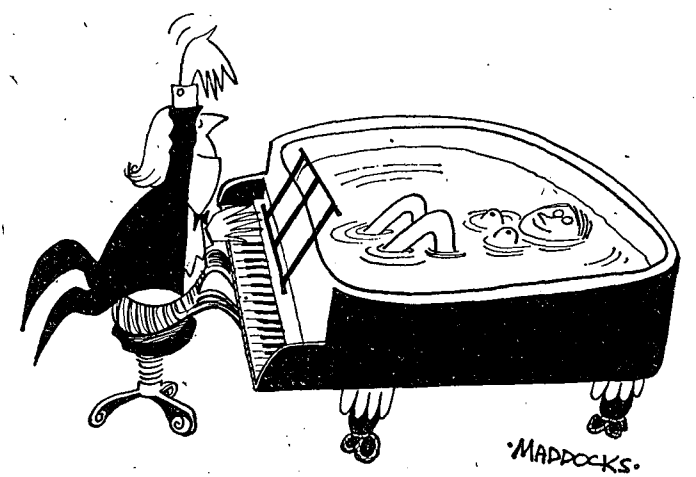
ask for time off to paint his house, Dad remarked that he need not bother to come back again.

It isn't easy, whichever way you look at it, to lose a slot machine in a seaside town's main street; and it's quite hard to lose a paper working model of Adolf Hitler anywhere. My father managed it because his mind at the time was elsewhere. It was devoted to the nine dozen pairs of wooden-wheeled skates with laces and one dozen pairs of white skating boots he had just ordered from Hamoco Ltd. Mr. Agger was already busy painting a skating mural round the Kasbah's walls and had promised to include a giant Scotsman with eyes which would conceal peepholes from Sergeant Swindells' lavatory: Dad's thoughts were full of Crazy Nites and Olde Tyme Skating Evenings and Roller Netball. He didn't quite know how he would provide incidental music to the skating, but it seemed a good start to buy for five pounds a grand piano from a saleroom up the town; and to paint it red and grey. © Philip Norman 1967

Philip Norman, who is twenty-three, won the Sunday Times Magazine's contest for young writers in July, 1966. He was educated in the Isle of Wight, and aspired to be a cartoonist; but it was as a journalist and feature-writer that he made his entry into the provincial press, before moving to London, to join the staff of a national weekly.



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Drifters

They belong to no place, and they go where the wind blows . . .

BY D'ARCY NILAND

"I TELL you one thing," the Maori said. "Never trust a dog with light-coloured eyes. They're mean, boy. Real mean."

"What the hell's that got to do with what I said to you?" I asked.

"When?"

"Just now."

"What'd you say to me?"

"I said I'm brand-new here. I don't know anything about New Zealand, I said, but I'll have a cut at anything, I said, and I'll be in that bush job with you."

"What job?"

"The job you said you want a mate for, for God's sake."

"Aw, yeah—that's right, Aussie. Yeah. What I was leading up to say was that blokes are the same. Blokes with light-coloured eyes. I steer clear of 'em. Like I mean, if you was one of 'em I'd have been gone after the first drink. Your eyes is blue, the best kind there is."

"Ah, cut out the guff, mate. When's the job start?"

"Not guff. It's your shout."

"I know. You don't have to tell me."

The barman appeared and leaned over the counter; a big hump with ears a long way from his hair. "Hey, knock it off, you two." He hardly opened his mouth so say it.

We looked at him.

"You want to argue, do it outside."

He walked away. Me and the Maori looked at each other. Maybe we were pretty stewed, but we didn't think so.

"There's other pubs," Hookey said. "Come on."

"Wait a minute," I said. "One thing I don't like, it's being pushed around."

"I'm going for a leak."

The barman came back to me. "You're all right," he said. "But

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that smoke, Hookey, he's a loudmouthed hophead. Shake him off and you can drink here all afternoon. I seen him latch on to you. He's a no-hoper."

"What makes you think it's any of your business who I chum up with?"

He shrugged his big shoulders. "Just tipping you. I know his form."

"Look, mate," I said. "I got here last night. Today I walked the town. I don't know anybody. I come in here for a quiet one and up he comes. At least he talked to a man. He's friendly."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I like friendly people."

"You buy any trouble you want, pal, but don't buy it here."

"You ever come to Sydney some time, and you don't know a soul, and you want a little company only there isn't any . . . just look me up. I won't pay you back. I'll show you some real hospitality."

Hookey came back and stood quiet beside me. The barman didn't like what I said. "I thought all along you were a convict," he said. "Where'd you leave your chains?"

"Come on," Hookey said.

"They still use kerosene lamps over there?" the barman said.

"Only when they're entertaining New Zealanders," I said. "Just to make 'em feel at home."

I got off the stool, and Hookey and me we went out. Hookey was laughing. He thought that crack was a beauty, he said. He slapped me on the back. He said did I see the look on the barman's face as he tried to think of a comeback, I felt a bit pleased with myself, too. Usually I don't think of the answers until the next day.

"What'd you do to that bloke to get him so snaky on you?" I said.

"Nothing. Honest. He used to be a copper, and he don't like Maoris. The Butcher, they used to call him. He just don't like Maoris, Duggie, that's all."

Fair enough. We went on a pub crawl until six o'clock when the pubs shut and the town drops dead. But we got half a dozen bottles and polished them off. We talked and laughed. This Hookey, twenty-one against my twenty-three, enjoyed my company as much as I enjoyed his. I belong to no-one. I belong to no place. I go where the wind blows. And I stay where it blows warm until it blows cold.

I said we'd go down to the Chinese café and have a feed, but he pushed me to come home to his place. He lived out near

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I went straight up to him and knocked his smile clean off

Kingsland. We jumped a trolley bus. They go like a blade over a beard, those trolley buses, smooth and clean. This house where Hookey took me was weatherboard, an old-looking dump snugged up in the dark, not a light anywhere. The street lamp showed the paint peeling on the door. Hookey twirled the bell.

"Hey, Ma, it's me, Hookey. Open up."

There was no answer. Was she snoring off, sick, or saving electricity?

Hookey twirled the bell again and kept twirling it. It seemed insane, trying to make a dead house hear you.

Then her voice came like a little explosion: "You drunken

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no-good. You don't stop ringing that bell, I'll call the police. You get away."

"Aw, come on, Ma. Let me in. I got a friend with me."

"You take your rotten friends from the races with you."

"He ain't from the races, Ma. He comes from Australia."

"You get out, you hear, you race-rat. Betting and drinking and you come home here when you feel like it. Bringing your no-good friends. Wasting good money on booze and horses."

"Aw, come on, Ma."

She told him again to go or she would call the police. He looked at me sheepishly. I nodded to him to let us get moving and I backed the few steps towards the gate. But he twisted the bell again.

"Let me in and get my things, then. I'm going off to the job in the morning."

He kept it up. Something had to give. The quiet street was full of the noise. The door crashed back and a man filled the doorway, a big Maori with his shirt half tucked into his trousers.

"You heard what she said."

Hookey stared at him. Then the woman appeared, with a hand on the man's arm and pulling him away. "Let him alone, Peter," she said, and the big Maori eased back to let her get in front of him. She was in a dressing-gown. She had her hair in plaits like two bell-ropes. Her face was like some kind of savage carving.

"Get your damn things, then, and get out."

Hookey went through. The light went on and she shut the door. I waited five minutes. He came out with a grip and we walked silently down the street.

"I'm sorry about that, Duggie," he said.

"Who was the bloke—your old man?"

"Old man nothing," he said. "Nice, ain't it—your own mother?" We walked on. "Not like I don't give her no money, you know. I do."

"Isn't it your home as well?"

"That ain't no home, boy," Hookey said. "It's just a place to go back to when I'm in town."

"That cop stuff, was that bluff?"

"No, she's put 'em on to me from time to time. She ain't always like that, though. She'll break down and let me in when it suits her."

"What happens when she don't? Where do you go?"

"I sleep it off in the park. Or go up to the railway and doss down on the platform seat. That's a good place, Duggie. Out of the weather. Next morning I go back and she's okay."

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I was staying at a residential in Queen Street. I took him back there with me. Well, I couldn't see him stuck. I offered him the single bed and chucked a pillow on the floor for myself. But he flopped down there on the carpet and went to sleep. I threw a blanket over him.

I sat on the bed and smoked a cigarette. I was glad to have him there, in a way. I'd like a quid for all the dark, empty lonely rooms I've been in since I was a kid. Wooden skies and sunlight from a bulb; mine today, somebody else's tomorrow; the same all over, everywhere you go.

Next day we went out to the job, working for a sawmill in a valley out of a place called Te Heripi. We were about five or six miles from the mill, camped on our own in a shack. The job was to down the big trees and axe off the boughs, leaving the logs to be picked up and dragged away.

I never worked a crosscut saw in my life, but I soon got the knack of it, thanks to Hookey who had been a bushworker, he said, since he was fourteen. He knew all that country pretty well, and had been in and out of all the towns right over to the east coast. He reckoned his favourite town was Whakatane. He said he had a girl in there working at a café. Her name was Wicki Ropata, and he made her sound like Elizabeth Taylor, the way he cracked her up.

I found he was an extra good mate to work with and get along with. He could cook like a champ. He sang well, too. He suited me fine. But he never stopped talking about horses, and about this girl at Whakatane. I didn't mind about the girl, but I told him to stick a sock in his face about the horses. If there's anything I couldn't care less about it's horses. Horses and cricket.

We stashed our dough away and reckoned we'd go into town on a bust at the end of a month. But Hookey, he didn't wait that long. I was fishing down in the creek one Saturday morning and I came back to find him gone. I didn't think much about it straight off. I thought he might have gone over behind the trees. I cleaned the fish. When he didn't show up, I gave a cooee.

I went into the shack, and it seemed like Hookey's old woman was talking in my ear, and that ex-copper barman, The Butcher. But Hookey's bag was still there, and his old duds hanging over the string line. I looked in my suitcase, scratched around, then emptied everything out. All my folding money was gone, the whole £40 of it.

It didn't take any working out. He had set out to get my confidence and, having got it, just picked the moment to strike. And this was it. That's the way I saw it. The few things he left

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behind weren't worth a cracker. Why saddle himself with them?

Whakatane was where he'd gone, I reckoned, to have himself a good time. I got out on the road and waited an hour for a lift right through. He'd be sorry when I caught up with him.

The first place I went to was the café, the Golden Spider, but it was closed, like pretty well everything else on a Saturday. I went down a side entrance to the premises at the back. A sleepy Yugoslav was sitting reading a newspaper in a tossed-out armchair in the backyard. I told him I had an urgent message for Wicki Ropata, and he told me where she lived.

I walked there fast. The day was a scorcher, and I carried my coat. I found the house, blistering in the sun, the street full of ragged kids shooting each other dead with sticks. Some old bloke padded back down the hall and got the girl. She was young and hefty and dressed to go somewhere, though she was eating one of those sugar pigs and the pink crumbs were on her thick purple lips. Her dress was all over loud flowers. She looked at me like the stranger I was.

I said, "Hookey Joseph—is he here?"

She said, "Who?"

"Hookey Joseph," I said.

"I don't know no Hookey Joseph," she said. "You sure you got the right place?"

Something told me she was as puzzled as she looked, and that I was making a fool of myself. But I went on. "He said you were his girl. Wicki Ropata, he said. Works at the Golden Spider café. He never stops talking about you."

She shook her head, and I was more annoyed with the mystery in her stupid face than I was with the way she kept nibbling the sugar pig. I described Hookey to her—short, lean, with a slightly pigeon-toed walk and a pockmarked face.

"What?" she said. "That creep."

"You know him, then?"

"My God," she said. "That creep. Telling all them things about me. How do you like that? Wait till I tell Horry about that. He'll skin him alive. Hey, Horry, come here a minute."

Horry came down the hall, a young Maori spilling over his belt, with a round fat face and his big head on one side, shy and suspicious at the same time.

I thought I had put Hookey in trouble, telling too much, and I wasn't one for that. "Maybe I made a mistake," I said.

"You sure did," she said. "I never had nothing to do with that feller in my life. Every day for three days or more he kept coming in the café. Coming and going. All day long. Drinking coffee.

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Trying to talk to me. A damn pest. Nothing but a damn pest. You think I have anything to do with that creep when I'm engaged to Horry here? Look."

She held out a finger with an engagement ring on it. "Three days. In and out of that place. Trying to make up to me."

"Okay," I said. "You've told me."

"Cheek of that thing, saying I'm his girl."

"Yeah," Horry said. "Yeah." He looked at me. "You a mate of his, mister?"

"I was," I said, and moved off the verandah.

"You see him, you tell him I better not meet up with him."

"Okay."

"Won't be okay; it'll be kayo."

"Yeah, yeah."

Horry would have carried on for a week, making a big pitch in front of his girl. Beating the war drum, but only wanting peace. The world's full of 'em, drumbeaters and their women. All his troubles were ahead of him, marrying her. Hookey was just plain dim, though, seeing a peach in a lemon, falling for the box instead of the chocolates.

I went down the main street and did the rounds of the pubs. There was no sign of him. Maybe he had shot back to Auckland. What was I to do, go back there? I had a drink and thought about it. I was hot and full of hate. It wasn't so much the loss of the money that cut me raw; it was the fact that a so-called mate could do that to me.

I thought I'd do the town again. At least I'd be making sure—as sure as I could—that I had done my best to find him.

Halfway down the main street a big flyblown Maori standing in a doorway clamped a hand on my shoulder as I passed and said, "Hey!" I quickly faced him. He had bloodshot eyes and big horse teeth stained with tobacco. He had a sixpenny book of tickets and a pencil.

"We rafflin' mutton birds, friend," he said. "You take a ticket —a shillin' for a good cause?"

"I don't eat mutton birds," I said. I didn't even rightly know what a mutton bird was.

"Don't matter. You take a ticket."

I looked down the street. He had two drunken friends doing the same, pulling up passers-by. I knew what the good cause was —dough for booze.

"Anyway," I said, "I won't be here long."

"Don't matter. You just write down your address. We'll send 'em anywhere in New Zealand."

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Another time I might have given him the bob and been done with it. But two Maoris putting it over me was too much. What's more, I hate standover men. I was hot and wild, damned up with fury.

"Nothing doing," I told him.

He caught up a handful of my shirt. "A lousy shillin'," he said. "Come on."

Take him on? Not me. All of them, black, white, or brindle, they're hard to beat. And he had two others. So it was up with the old knee right in the lunch basket. He dropped like a shot bullock, groaning on the footpath. Even as I ran, I felt better for having let off steam. I turned the corner and made up towards the post office, all the time knowing I had to get away, and wondering how I could.

A man can be lucky. There was a joker with a buckboard just pulling out from the kerb. I put it on him for a ride and jumped in the back and lay down on the deck. He passed down the main street. I took a peep. The Maori was still on the footpath, a crowd around him. In time the three no-goods would be looking for a head to break, and I wasn't going to be about.

The driver was on his way to Taneatua, but I left him a few miles out and headed across country, back to the camp. There was nothing else for it. All night it took me, with a rest here and there. The idea was to get my gear together and clear out.

The sun was well up over the trees when I came in sight of the shack. The next thing this hysterical voice yelled at me, and Hookey Joseph came running down to meet me as if there was a fire somewhere. He seemed mad with excitement, singing out "Duggie, where'd you get to? Where you been, boy? I thought something happened."

His face was one big smile of joy. One big smile. I went straight up to him and knocked it clean off.

"You lousy thieving cow," I said. "Where's my dough?"

He shook his head, looking up, wiping the blood from his mouth. "You don't understand. We're rich, Duggie. We're rolling in it."

He got up, beckoning me, and ran towards the shack. I followed. Inside he pointed to bundles of notes on his bunk, more than I'd ever seen in my life.

"Sixteen hundred quid, Duggie," he squealed. "Sixteen hundred lovely quid. Sonny Boy, he come home at twenty to one."

"You went to the races?"

"Rotorua, yeah."

"That's where you took my forty quid without telling me?"

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"I stuck it with mine. I didn't tell you because you wouldn't have given it to me."

"What about if you'd lost it?"

"You would have got it back," he said. "You would have. But I couldn't lose it, Duggie. I knew that. I was on to a dead cert. I proved it, didn't I?" He grabbed up the money and pushed two bundles at me. "Half's yours."

I took it, too—and threw it in my suitcase with other things of mine lying around.

"What are you doing?" Hookey said. "What's up?"

I didn't answer him. Full of rage, I was. Rage about everything—jumping to conclusions, belting off to Whakatane, blabbing to a pea-brained sheila, tangling with Maoris, trudging all night . . . all because this simple bastard had gone and put a roll on a horse.

"What'd I do wrong?" he said. "Tell me. What'd I do wrong? I done it for us, Duggie. For you and me."

He looked like a mourner as I walked away.

I must have covered three miles carrying that suitcase. It wasn't heavy, but it was heavy enough. I walked the rage out of me. Then I lay down in the shade and thought it all out. I thought it out like this. That £800 in my pocket didn't make me feel any better, because there was something missing that it couldn't buy. What was it? I didn't know—a piece out of place somewhere that made me feel restless and dissatisfied.

That Hookey: getting kicked out of a hotel for no good reason by a man full of contempt who'd smash him up as quick as look at him; trying to find a home where there wasn't one, abused by his old woman with less cause than he had to abuse her; running a long-distance romance with a girl that took his fancy but who didn't even know his name and wouldn't spit on him if he was on fire.

Why, the whole world was down on this bloke, pushing him around and trampling all over him. And here I was doing the same for no good cause either. Punching him up and walking out on him, when what he had done was show me he was a mate worth having and at the same time letting me know I was worthwhile, too. For he had come back. That was the main thing. I was the one who hadn't trusted him. My judgment had let me down. That's what stung. I was the one who had the apology to make.

I started back towards the camp. And as I went what was missing wasn't missing any more. But I still couldn't put a name to it. I just knew.

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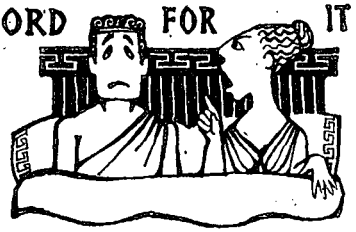
REPENT

Happy they
Who don't forget the wedding day
But they're
Rare **Anon**

THE GREEKS HAD A WORD FOR IT



A wise man must not take a wife. For in the first place his study of philosophy will be hindered, and it is impossible for anyone to attend to his books and to his wife. Matrons want many things, costly dresses, gold, jewels, great outlay, maid-servants, all kinds of furniture, litters and gilded coaches. Then come curtain-lectures the livelong night: she complains that one lady goes out better dressed than she: that another is looked up to by all: "I am a poor despised nobody at the ladies' assemblies." "Why did you ogle that creature next door?" "Why were you talking to the maid?" "What did you bring from the market?" "I am not allowed to have a single friend . . ." THEOPHRASTUS, *4th Century B.C.*

Limited Appeal

How happy a thing were a wedding,
And a bedding,
If a man might purchase a wife
For a twelve-month and a day;
But to live with her all a man's life,
For ever and for aye,
Till she grows as grey as a cat,
Good faith, Mr. Parson, excuse me from that!

THOMAS FLATMAN, *On Marriage*

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At Leisure

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

July 12, 1667: After dinner home, and there finding my wife in a dogged humour for my not dining at home, and I did give her a pull by the nose and some ill words, which she provoked me to by something she spoke, we fell extraordinarily out, insomuch that I going to the office to avoid further anger, she followed me in a devilish manner thither, and with much ado I got her into the garden out of hearing, to prevent shame . . .

SAMUEL PEPYS

Wrinkle, wrinkle, fading star!
Do you need more caviar?
If you do, your best resource is
To cash in on your divorces.

LORNA WOOD

Letter to the Editor

"I have borne for twenty-two years with all humility and gentleness of spirit all the insults of a coarse nature. I have been a devoted slave to the man I swore to love and obey: I have borne insults and hard work without a murmur, but my blood boils when I see my gentle innocent girls tremble at the sound of their father's voice."

Editor's reply: "As he is the breadwinner, you must bear it with a meek and quiet spirit."

WOMAN'S MAGAZINE, 1870

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Where We Came In

The skyline smoke veers—veers and dims
  As unpredictable as your whims—
The planing seagull rockets by
  With your identical watchful eye;
And everything—within, without—
  Shakes to your voice, or the west wind's shout.
Is there no peace—no kindly thought—
  In this damned holiday resort?
At night, when quiet falls serene,
  You'll snore like a foundering submarine;
And I'll lie still and watch the stars
  Steal past the shuddering window-bars:
Cold stars, whose rays across the years
  Impartial glint, on dew—or tears.

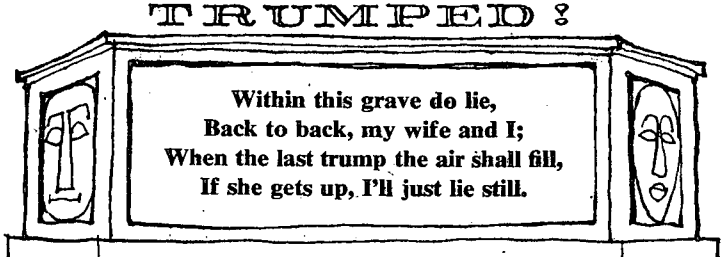
ARNOLD SILCOCK, *The Honeymoon Anniversary*

AD LIB: The quarrel scene between a stage husband and wife grew more realistic with each performance. Sometimes they threw in so much invective of their own that they added about twenty-five minutes to the play's running time.

Now the secret is out. Actor Raymond Gérome has announced that he is suing actress Madeleine Robinson for persistently insulting him. And the first casualty of the lawsuit is the play—the French version of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Tonight the play ended a fifty-one-week run at Paris' Renaissance Theatre, because of the row between the stars.

JACK GEE, *The Sun*, 2 December, 1965

TRUMPED?



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The Bridegroom of Qasim

Marriage may be made in heaven . . .
but be sure who's behind the veil

BY RONALD KAY

AMONG the great Arabists, Burton, Doughty, Lawrence, Philby, the name of Pugh Mohammed-Jones of Qasim has been rather overlooked.

Qasim is an island in the Straits of Bab-el-Maala. It was visited in turn by the Abyssinians, the Malays, the Persians, the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French, the Turks, the Germans and the British. All were stunned by its repulsive aspect save the British, who annexed the island in 1888. In September 1894, Messrs. Bowen Brothers, the Glamorganshire anthracite company, set up a coaling-station there. As Resident Manager the Company sent out Mr. Pugh Jones, Secretary of Bryndaff Colliery, Pontypool.

Mr. Pugh Jones' steel rimmed spectacles concealed a remarkably sharp gaze. Indeed, his main reason for accepting this outlandish post was to avoid the expense of marriage to Blodwyn Pritchard who had cooked for him without payment for over fourteen years. "Parsimonious Pugh" he was called in Bryndaff. "The Counter of the Coal-grains," the Arabs of Qasim soon named him. The salary of the Resident Manager was generous, as he had been careful to ascertain.

"I'm putting it by, you know," he would explain to the captain of every ship coaling at Qasim. They usually invited him to a free meal aboard.

One of the new Manager's earliest innovations had been to paint a notice on the mud wall of his office. NO BAKSHEESH it read in giant whitewashed letters.

Three months after his arrival Pugh Jones was swindled out of

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a Maria Theresa dollar—value 4½d.—by Abdulla, the wharfinger.

"It all comes from not knowing the language," he complained to Qadhi Hasan, the scholar of Qasim. The Qadhi was a gentle old man who wore a greasy coat of silk, striped red and yellow. His beard was dyed with henna.

"I should be honoured to teach you the local dialects," he replied, winding an amber rosary six times around his wrist.

Pugh Jones learned quickly. Proficiency in Arabic brought even greater opportunity for thrift. Within two years his account at the Bryndaff Savings Bank had swollen impressively.

It became his custom in the cool of the evening to walk up the wadi, counting up his savings as he went.

"Some nest egg," he would exclaim, skipping with delight among the grey thorns. He had taken to wearing a faded Bedouin skirt tightly knotted over his plump bottom and short pink legs. The frugal ways of the Bedouin greatly appealed to him.

Early in February, 1896, the Resident Manager was returning from his walk when he caught sight of Fatima, daughter of Qadhi Hasan, unveiled in her father's date garden. She was as beautiful as a pearl from Kuwait. Mr. Pugh Jones became restless at night. Wakeful at the first glimmer of dawn, he would listen distractedly to the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer from the minaret below his house, until Ali, the cook, shuffled in with a glass of spiced tea. This was always an irritating reminder of the extravagance of paying a servant.

Sipping his tea one morning, Mr. Pugh Jones solved his problem. "By marrying Fatima, I will be able to do without Ali," he decided.

An intermediary would be necessary to arrange the marriage. Abdullah, the wharfinger, was instructed to approach the Qadhi on the Manager's behalf. The reply was not unfavourable. Mr. Pugh Jones was invited to call. He found the Qadhi sitting over his books and manuscripts, their ink brown with age. No mention was made of the purpose of the visit. A pleasant smell of roasting meat floated over the verandah.

"Pray eat with us," said the Qadhi. Cooked rice was brought in baskets, a table cloth was laid, dates, bread, and honey were spread upon it, and goat's meat came up in relays sizzling from the fire.

Afterwards, Mr. Pugh Jones perfumed himself with incense from a small burner.

"I must take my leave and go," he said, having been instructed in the correct ritual.

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"You have honoured me with the visit," replied the Qadhi. "Command me as to what service I can do."

The marriage could now be discussed.

"No daughter of mine can marry an unbeliever," explained the Qadhi. "The curse of Allah will be upon her."

If he became a Muslim, Mr. Pugh Jones inquired, must he make a costly trip to Mecca?

"Such a visit would guarantee you a place in Paradise," the Qadhi replied, "but it is not otherwise obligatory."

Mr. Pugh Jones belched loudly, in accordance with polite Bedouin custom. "So long as there's no entrance fee, I'll join," he said.

The Qadhi refrained from mentioning his daughter's bride-price until the guest was already in the entrance-porch.

"She will cost but six camels and 200 dinars," he murmured politely.

"Out of the question," snapped Pugh Jones, hurrying away. With some difficulty he dismissed Fatima from his mind.

It was during the rains, when the wadi was flooded with water, that he next saw her. Fatima was bathing behind a tamarisk bush. Unfortunately for Mr. Pugh Jones, Fatima was also perfect in figure. Her shoulders were smooth and soft, her thighs round, and her breasts, as the Arabs say, rose firmly as the desert dunes in moonlight.

Discussions were reopened as to her bride-price.

With some difficulty, Pugh Mohammed-Jones, as he now became, persuaded the Qadhi to accept only two camels plus twelve months' supply of free coal.

They clasped hands.

"There are also the wedding expenses," the Qadhi hinted.

"Just a ring, candles, sweetmeats, bed and bed-covering. As for the singers and musicians, and the cost of the feast—fifty dinars at the most."

Negotiations were again broken off.

Mr. Mohammed-Jones tried cold baths and vigorous exercise. He avoided the wadi. It was no use. An unquenchable passion had been aroused in the Resident Manager. He agreed to pay the wedding expenses.

The marriage contract was executed before the Mansab, religious ruler of Qasim. Round the walls of his pillared room, pierced by seven carved windows, the Mansab and the committee of sayyids leaned on cushions. In one corner sat the scribe, with a pillow on his knees to write on. The Mansab sealed the contract with a gold signet ring.

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"Tomorrow," resolved Mr. Mohammed-Jones, "I'll have another look at the girl."

The door leading into the harem at the Qadhi's house was two inches thick, made of ilb wood, and further strengthened by horizontal bars. Apart from the usual wooden lock there was a huge bolt held by a carved latch, with a smaller one to lock the hole which was made to enable the hand to pass through from the outside.

"My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door," murmured Mr. Mohammed-Jones to himself. The Song of Solomon had always been the most heavily thumbed portion of his Bible at Bryndaff Sunday School.

Mr. Mohammed-Jones did not dare to put his hairy hand into the hole. But he did have the temerity to peep through it. Inside he could just distinguish Fatima lying on a carpet in the inner room, her veil framing the oval of her face. Her eyes, blackened with kohl, sparkled in the dim light.

"By Jove," exclaimed Pugh unwisely.

"The Qadhi will have your ears cut off," interrupted a harsh female voice behind him. It was the girl's mother, a formidable crone in black.

"I—er—came to fix the date for the marriage ceremony," he stammered.

"You have yet to buy the clothes for the bride," she rasped.

Mr. Mohammed-Jones went pale.

"You will now give," insisted the old lady, "no less than two full suits, consisting of two shifts, one of crimson silk, the other of blue cotton, two pairs of trousers, one of silk, the other of striped cotton, two jubbahs, fitting tight to the body, of chintz, two veils, one of white cotton, the other of chequered blue, two pairs of slippers, one of green shagreen skin with high heels, the other of brown leather with flat bone-heels and shod with iron, a printed muslin handkerchief, a set of bandages and kerchiefs for the head, a chain for the neck hung with bells, four silver amulets with coral in between, and six gold bracelets."

"Stop!" said Mohammed-Jones, "I demand another interview with the Qadhi."

The Qadhi received him with composure. "You are a great man in Qasim," he told the prospective bridegroom. "The merchants bring you bribes. Let them present you with apparel for your bride."

This suggestion was promptly taken up, causing the cloth-vendors in the bazaar to wring their hands over their depleted stocks.

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The wedding was celebrated the day after Zina. The bridegroom sat on a special throne of carpets, two wazirs on each side, with the Qadhi clicking his rosaries nearby. Mohammed-Jones had borrowed a turban for the occasion. Underneath, his sparse ginger hair was parted neatly down the middle.

"Let us go to the other room," announced the Qadhi after some time.

"By all means," gulped the bridegroom. He had already smoked seventeen pipes of the hubble-bubble.

The Qadhi knocked on a latticed door at the top of a winding staircase.

"Blessed be the Prophet of God," he called.

"Yes, indeed," echoed Mohammed-Jones fervently.

The door however opened on to the bride, cross-legged on the marriage couch. She was encased in rich draperies, her face hidden by veils. Mr. Mohammed-Jones was placed in the groom's position with the male relations in the opposite corner of the chamber. The music began. The Singer of Qasim beat the drum, the hajir, which had red patterns painted on each end. Other musicians beat smaller drums, the mirwas. A piper, his face puckered in agony, blew on a double pipe, the miznar.

"Don't strain yourself," murmured Pugh Mohammed-Jones, thinking of the bill.

Two performers commenced the *Sharh-al-Abid*, the Dance of the Slaves.

"What about all that food I've paid for?" interrupted the bridegroom.

The ensuing feast was lavish and interminable. At last the relations and guests bade the happy couple good-night.

It is traditional among the people of Qasim for the bridegroom to take to the marriage-bed first. His clothes are then removed by his wife.

"A real little wanton, aren't you?" chuckled Mr. Mohammed-Jones, lending himself eagerly to this operation.

Custom finally decrees that the bride must resign her veil and jubbah just before extinguishing the light. "Come along, my beauty," whispered Mr. Mohammed-Jones. Giggling, his bride complied.

The next moment, Ali, the servant, dozing in the passageway, was startled by the sight of a naked and indignant figure streaking across the courtyard. "Pray clothe yourself, Sahib," urged Ali, hurrying forward with a towel.

A stream of Welsh oaths rent the desert air as Mr. Mohammed-Jones hammered at the Qadhi's room.

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"I'll not take it lying down," he declared, brandishing in the Qadhi's face the Bryndaff Savings Bank Book he always kept under his pillow.

"A damn fraud I tell you."

The Qadhi smiled.

"You have my daughter—of what do you complain?"

"Aye, but which bloody daughter?" shrieked Mohammed-Jones. "The oldest and plainest of the lot!"

He recalled with a shudder the face of his bed-mate who bore in fact a quite horrific likeness to Blodwyn Pritchard. The Qadhi laid a soothing hand upon his shoulder.

"We stipulated my daughter," he answered, "but not which one."

Mohammed-Jones ground his teeth. "The deal's off, boyo!" he shouted.

The Qadhi looked sad.

"The contract was signed before the Mansab, my friend," he observed. "If you break it I cannot answer for the consequences."

Outside the dust-covered doorway stood two of the Qadhi's men, clicking the bolts in their Turkish rifles. Carefully removing his spectacles, Mr. Mohammed-Jones returned with sullen grace to the marriage-bed.

It was not until later in life that Pugh Mohammed-Jones of Qasim contributed his notable series of articles upon Arab Marriage Customs to the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. By that time he had also become an authority upon Arab Divorce and the Maintenance of Progeny and Concubines in Islamic Law.

© Ronald Kay 1967

RONALD KAY is Anglo-Welsh and went to Cambridge University, afterwards training as a barrister in the Middle Temple in London, and learning Arabic during his term of war service with the Royal Horse Artillery. He has worked in British Arabia, but is now serving in the South Pacific, so witnessing at first hand the exotic background which is described in his works. His official position requires him to write under a pseudonym. Ronald Kay's wife is also a writer; they have two children—by birth one is Arab and the other is Fijian.

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BY WINSTON WEATHERS

Monday Night at Mrs. Gasperi's

FEW CAN LAUGH THEMSELVES OUT OF LOVE'S CLUTCHES

MOVY was a clown. Oh, I don't mean a clown by profession, like in a regular circus, but he was certainly a clown in every other respect. You know what I mean. Making everybody laugh all evening whenever we went down to Mrs. Gasperi's on Monday nights to drink.

Movy would be there on Monday nights, right out in the middle of things, telling all those bawdy jokes or imitating the cop down at the corner on Clarence Street or any such thing, all of it lots of fun, and you were glad Movy was there, letting go that way. We always went down on Mondays because we knew he would come down to drink and he made life better, and brighter too, the way he looked at it. It was all a joke to Movy. He said that himself, how it was all a joke and you might as well have fun, you know, and laugh and sing and stand on your head if you had to and just let go like that.

"Life is bubbles, bubbles, bubbles," Movy would say. "Drink to it, boys, drink to it!"

And Mrs. Gasperi adored Movy. "He's like wine," she would say. "Or champagne! You can get drunk on Movy. He's such an utter fool!"

Movy would come down out of the darkness of Clarence Street and stand for a minute on the stairs that led down to Mrs. Gasperi's. Then he'd throw his straw hat sailing down on to one of the tables, then come leaping after it, and he would throw his big arms around Mrs. Gasperi and cry, "Ah, my *chérie*, where have you been all my life? Tell me now, where have you been!"

And all the time he'd be making ugly faces at Dr. Pratt, who

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would be sitting off to himself trying to read the newspaper. Or Movy would start winking at you and the way Movy would wink was hysterical, it was so funny, you just died laughing. And then Movy would let go of big Mrs. Gasperi and walk over to Dr. Pratt and flip him on the ear, and Movy would put the money in the juke box and Mrs. Gasperi would set up the drinks and it was always like that on Monday nights down there. You were glad to be there out of the darkness of Clarence Street and you were happy because of Movy, because Movy never made you mad or embarrassed, but always seemed to be saying, "See how silly we all are! We're in this together! I'm silly for you! I'm silly because I like you and I want you to see how stupid I am!"

And Mrs. Gasperi would urge him on. "Now, Movy," she would say, "look like a dog!" Or Mrs. Gasperi would say, "Now, Movy, do us the ballet dance!"

We had wonderful times, you bet, with Movy acting the clown all the time, Movy with his straw hat and his yellow sweat shirt and the khaki trousers, Movy who was so big and had muscles because he worked in the brewery doing something or other like carrying the kegs or something like that, Movy coming down to Mrs. Gasperi's to drink it down and make us happy, his blond hair cut so short he was almost bald, not really, but like a soldier or a sailor with a crew cut, Movy grinning and making faces and winking at you all the time.

Movy was the clown all right, you bet, and Mrs. Gasperi's was his circus.

But something was different that one Monday night. We were all there waiting for Movy—Mrs. Gasperi and Dr. Pratt and Little Arnold and me—and we were thinking, Gee, won't it be swell when Movy gets here and we really let go. But Movy came late and he didn't throw his straw hat down the stairs but just came on down and sat off to himself at one of the tables and had Mrs. Gasperi bring him a drink; and he didn't say anything but looked dreadfully solemn, a way he'd never looked before, never since I had started coming on Monday nights. It was something dreadful to see Movy like that. You didn't know what to say to anybody because you were all ready to laugh and now there wasn't any laughter and the clown wouldn't be a clown and you didn't know what to do.

Movy sat at one end of the room and the rest of us at the other. He just sat there, drinking, and staring off into space, and he wasn't winking or anything and there wasn't the slightest possibility of a smile on his face. It was terrible. It made one weak in

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the stomach. You know how it is when people stop being funny; they look so washed out and ugly. "Well," said Little Arnold after a while to the rest of us, "what's the matter with him?"

We all looked at each other. We had to face the question. Dr. Pratt cleared his throat. "Perhaps it is the state of the world," he said. "World conditions being what they are, the conflict of ideologies and so forth—"

"Are you crazy or something?" Little Arnold asked. "Movy never reads the newspapers. He isn't bright enough. He don't go in for that stuff."

"Maybe it's something at the brewery," I said. "Maybe he's lost his job."

Little Arnold grinned. "Now you're crazy. Movy's already lost five jobs this year. It never bothers him at all. You know Movy. He wouldn't let anything at the brewery bother him."

"Maybe he's drunk," suggested Dr. Pratt.

"Oh Lord," said Little Arnold. "You're raving tonight. When Movy gets drunk he gets funnier. He don't get so glum as all that. You've seen him drunk before. He's never like this."

"Well," said Dr. Pratt, "what do you think is the matter, if you're so smart?"

Little Arnold shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know? I just know what it ain't." Little Arnold shook his head back and forth. "It's just pathetic, that's all."

But Mrs. Gasperi, who was infinitely wise about the ways of the world, scowled across the table at all of us. "Ah, you idiots!" she said. "Don't you know nothing? It's obvious." She bit her lips in remorse. "Movy's in love."

We all turned and looked at the clown. In love? Impossible. Yet—could it be? For Movy? Love is a tragedy that occurs in many lives and few can laugh themselves out of its clutches, but surely Movy could do that. Surely the clown could see that it was all bubble, bubble, bubble and would not let love do this terrible thing to him, depress him, rob him, destroy him.

Dr. Pratt leaned back in his chair and giggled, "Oh, Mrs. Gasperi, you are my darling! You think of everything."

And Mrs. Gasperi, in all her bosominess and strange, feminine glory, frowned and sighed with all the sincerity she had within her. "Yes," she said. "It's all too obvious. I've seen it before." She shook her big bushy head and sighed. "I've seen it happen before and it is always terrible."

Then we all had a drink. Even Movy, sitting there in his own little world, sitting like a stranger, not at all like good old Movy with the big smile and the big pat on the back, not at all like

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good old Movy; even he seemed to know the terror of it. And finally Movy got his straw hat and he went up the stairs and out into the darkness of Clarence Street and we were all a little sick inside. Mrs. Gasperi cleaned off the tables. She shook her head and said again, "I've seen it before and it's always terrible."

And so that had been the beginning of it all. After we had left that Monday night, we wandered away, a little ill at ease about the mysterious ways of the world. Yet when we had gone back the next Monday night we had something of hope in our hearts, thinking maybe it was like a sickness that you got over in no time at all; and hoping and thinking that maybe Movy would be back with the good times and all the bubble, bubble, bubble and you could forget that one night and never say anything about it. We had thought that maybe Movy would come and we would all have a drink and a good laugh and that would be the end of it. We had all thought that, except Mrs. Gasperi, who was a very pessimistic and very melancholy woman underneath all her glitter.

"You claim it is love," Dr. Pratt had said to Mrs. Gasperi. "You might be wrong. It might be something else entirely."

"You are a pig-head," Mrs. Gasperi said. "I know all about these things. I know Movy and I know what love can do to a man. It can turn him inside out. It can kill him."

"I thought love was supposed to be beautiful," Little Arnold said. "I thought it was supposed to do good things for you."

"You are thinking of sex," said Mrs. Gasperi. "Sex will do that for you. But love will destroy you. I know all about these things."

"Well," said Dr. Pratt, "I didn't think that people who laughed a lot ever fell in love."

"Oh," said Mrs. Gasperi in a sudden rage, "you are an idiot! People who laugh a lot are sometimes the most susceptible. They are good-natured. They get taken in."

"Well," said Dr. Pratt, "I never thought it would happen to Movy."

But when Movy had come at last we knew it was worse than ever before—not the clown at all, but the corpse of the clown; and we had to stay in the same room with it and watch it drink and sit there, staring into space, and it wouldn't say a word, but only sigh, now and then, and roll its eyes and sigh again and slouch down in the chair, holding the drink in its hands, and after a while get up and go with a very gentle and solemn, "Good night, Mrs. Gasperi," and "Good night, Dr. Pratt," and "Good night, little Arnold," and even to me he would say it.

We all knew that Movy had it bad, somehow, someway, and

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all the laughter was done, like when spring and summer and autumn are over, and all there is is the winter, very cold and very cutting and very callous. And when Movy had left and Mrs. Gasperi went to wipe off the table, she stood over it and then started beating her fists on the top of it, she was in such a rage.

"Oh," cried Mrs. Gasperi. "Some wench has a hold of him for sure! Look at this! Look at what he has done." And we went over and saw where Movy had secretly carved a little heart deep into the varnished top of the table, and mingled with it in the wood was another heart, the two hearts intertwined.

"It is love," said Dr. Pratt.

"Oh, God," cried Mrs. Gasperi. "I've been saying that all along."

"Well," said Little Arnold, "I hope he doesn't come any more. It depresses me."

"Some wench is doing it," muttered Mrs. Gasperi. "I know all about these things."

Then we had a drink and tried to forget it all. But we couldn't really forget it and the Monday nights grew worse. Now it was so common and tawdry and dull, one hardly wanted to go down to Mrs. Gasperi's on Monday night. Everything had grown so difficult and dull down there, and the whisky didn't have any taste to it at all, and one just sat down there and drank beneath the glaring lights. You went down to Mrs. Gasperi's though, because you had to go; it was a part of your life and life never really changes much.

We all went down there, because we couldn't help ourselves, and there was always hope, of course—you always keep hoping you'll find whatever it is you've lost, keep hoping you'll get all the loneliness and the fun and the laughter back, even though something else inside you keeps saying you'll never get it back, it's all over and done with, it's the end of the season, and it's time for winter.

And Movy had kept coming, too, as though he had to come, like the rest of us. But he didn't ever stay long. Just came in, had a quick drink, looked round the place, then went out again. In a way, it was as if he came to prove something to us, to show us he had gone to another world, to show us that the clown was dead and what were we going to do about it anyway? More and more, he seemed to be saying, "If you don't like it you know what you can do about it." And you know how we go back to old places to show off our stuff, saying, "See how I've changed and I'm not like you at all any more, you never did really know

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me, I wasn't really like that at all." Well, that's the way it was with Movy now and he never said anything, but just drank and would stare at us sometimes as though daring us to say a word about it.

And worst of all was the way Movy began to change in other ways. He stopped wearing the straw hat and he let his hair grow out, not too long, but the way most fellows wear their hair, and he began to shine his shoes, and he stopped wearing the sweat shirt and wore white shirts and you could tell that something was happening all the way through Movy like that. Then he stopped wearing the khakis and bought himself a pair of wool trousers that were always pressed with a sharp crease. Oh, it was terrible to behold such a decline. The night he wore the necktie was the worst, of course, the very depths, the ultimate loss of all the glory and freedom and laughter that had been Movy. When Mrs. Gasperi saw him she had almost cried, Oh Lord; she did cry I guess, seeing him stand there at the head of the stairs in his polished shoes and his pressed trousers and the white shirt and now, at last, the necktie.

"Oh, the wench," she cried. "Oh, the wench! Don't you see what's happening, you idiots? Someone's trying to make him respectable!"

"A damn shame," said Little Arnold.

"Respectable and serious!" cried Mrs. Gasperi.

"It could happen to anyone," said Dr. Pratt.

"Oh, but to Movy," cried Mrs. Gasperi. "It's like turning out the light."

And we would all agree to that; what was happening to Movy, all that laughter and all that fun, well, it was like turning out the light, and it made you want to cry while you had your drink and it made you want to go back to the good old times and forget how bad things had become. And when Movy came down into the room that night and sat there and had his drink we knew the worst at last.

"You can smell him," whispered Little Arnold.

"Scented soap," said Dr. Pratt.

Mrs. Gasperi had collapsed on to the table, burying her big, bushy head into her fat arms, and sobbing, "Scented soap, scented soap."

She could take no more. The champagne, the wine that Movy had been, had grown tasteless and terrible to her, she could not bear it, she wanted to be rid of it at last. Movy was dead at last, love had conquered him, it had compromised him, the circus was over. All that was left to do was to bury the corpse, cover the

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body, let it all be over and done. The snows of winter had come at last; in spite of all, they had at last come and covered us.

So now we gathered, we knew, for the last time, on the last Monday night. It was as though it were a funeral or a wake, a wake I guess would be more the word. We had a drink. Dr. Pratt proposed a toast to the good old days, the happy days. Darkness had already fallen across Clarence Street and we were sitting, solemnly, forlorn, around the big round table at the far end of Mrs. Gasperi's place, saying little, for it was a sad occasion.

"Shall we sing a hymn?" asked Dr. Pratt.

"We can't," said Little Arnold. "I forgot to bring the pipe organ."

"Well, then," said Dr. Pratt, "we shall only meditate."

"Oh, you knuckleheads," said Mrs. Gasperi. "You are a curse to me, a very curse."

We all had another drink. Dr. Pratt picked up the newspaper and started to read. We were sitting there, after the darkness had fallen across Clarence Street, and the bright lights glared in Mrs. Gasperi's place, and we did not notice the door open, but there was only the sudden spinning of a straw hat down through the room and landing there on the table before us. Mrs. Gasperi blanched, turned white. Dr. Pratt choked on his whisky. We looked and there was Movy, the old Movy, big, dumb, good old smiling, pink-cheeked Movy standing up on the stairs and he came leaping down and he threw his arms round Mrs. Gasperi, crying, "Ah, my *chérie*, where have you been all my life, now tell me, where have you been?"

"Ah," cried Dr. Pratt. "The clown has come home again."

Then Movy leaned back and roared with uncontrollable laughter. It was irresistible. We could not help ourselves. We began to laugh too, at first shyly and uncertainly, for we had not laughed for a long time, but it was still there in us and it came swelling up out of us, out of our stomachs and our hearts; and we let the dam break in us and we felt the laughter and the good times coming back again, delighting us, like new wine rising in us. The drinks were served round, the music played.

"It has been a great joke!" cried Movy. "How long could they last, I wondered. You're stupid all of you! Didn't you see the fun of it all? Didn't you see the great fun in it?"

And Movy roared with laughter, his great body doubling up there inside the sweat shirt and the khakis. He had even cut his hair again and he folded Dr. Pratt's newspaper into a funny hat and strutted around the room with the funny hat on. There was the clean smell of a man about him. His cheeks glowed with the

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flush of new life. He had risen from the death of some terrible and alien decency, and now his face flushed red and alive like the bright paint of a clown's face.

Everything was beautiful again and we drank and were very gay at Mrs. Gasperi's. Oh, what a clown Movy was that night. Movy was standing up on the table, he was laughing, busting with laughter and making ugly faces.

"Bubbles, bubbles, bubbles, life is only bubbles," Movy was singing. "Drink to it boys, drink to it!"

"Ah," I whispered to Mrs. Gasperi, between the gales of laughter. "It was all a great joke. He's been teasing us all along! He was pretending to be dead."

But Mrs. Gasperi leaned her big, bushy head over towards me and whispered, "Do not believe him. He's a great liar. I know all about these things."

"What do you mean?"

"God, you are an idiot," she said. "Can't you see? He's been jilted. The wench has deserted him."

And I turned to look at him, at wonderful Movy who had come home again to us, to sparkle through the Monday nights while darkness pressed across Clarence Street. Could it possibly be?

"Movy, my clown!" Dr. Pratt was shouting. "You are my darling!"

Little Arnold was giggling over his drink.

Mrs. Gasperi began dancing round and round with Movy. His great muscular and hairy hands were holding her. She was so glad he had come back to her, glad that the clown and the fool had come home again and that the wench had fled away and left him; and that Movy would never be respectable or serious again, but we would all be free again, and he would be like wine to her or champagne to her and one could get drunk on Movy, God knows one could.

But as I looked at Movy there, I saw within his eyes, within the bright eyes of the clown, something deep and terrifying I had never seen before in Movy. Something more terrifying than I had seen in all the weeks past, and it was as if someone had turned out a light in Movy. And you know how it is when the light goes out; there is a darkness. For Movy was beginning to cry, the tears were in his eyes, and he buried his face in his hands and all we could hear was his sobbing, "O Lord, O Lord, O Lord, O Lord." And as he sank down at the table, we didn't laugh any more. Little Arnold just shook his head, saying, "Ain't it a shame? Now ain't it a shame?"

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BY JOHN LENNON

THE only man ever I knew to smile in the face of death was Tod Clancy, and he was an undertaker. A little creature, Tod; a death-watch beetle of a man who'd been dressed in black since the day he cut his first tooth. Indeed, he'd been planting the old and the unlucky in the village Downderry from the time he was old enough to hold a tape-measure. He had a great hooked nose, a big black hat that strained his ears, and a suit with a better shine to it than Mulligan's counter.

We were in Mulligan's beer-shop when he came in. "Ha—you're there then, Postie," he said, twittering around the room. "Will you take a drop with me then?"

I should've known something was on the boil. The only time Clancy said, "Drink up boys," was in his chapel of rest where the poor devils were hard of hearing. But I took it, not being one to fly in the face of Providence. Clancy was no hypocrite, though; he wished nobody good health. Instead he'd just stand there sipping his stout like it was hot tea and thinking to himself, Five-foot-ten mebbe, about twelve stone, do the whole job for thirty pound. No wonder he never got married.

I've no doubt he would have given his bride a quotation on her wedding night.

"Well now," said Clancy, "how's things with the best postman we ever had?"

"Great," I said, "great. In fact, if things was any better I couldn't stand it."

"And your family?"

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"Flourishing," I said, "and eating me out of house and home."

"Listen to that now," said Clancy thoughtfully.

"And yourself," I asked, "still in the land of the living, are you?"

"Never better," he said, "and that busy the day isn't long enough."

"You look a wee bit tired to me," I said, getting my blow in first.

"Ah," said Mulligan, folding two beefy arms over the counter, "that's sitting up half the night praying for a cold snap."

"No need for me to do that," said Clancy, without turning a hair. "Though it's true enough a bit of frost knocks the old ones over that hard you can hear the noise in Dublin. Will you not come over by the fire?"—to me.

I knew Clancy wouldn't care if I died of frost-bite, he was only for getting me away from Mulligan's ears. Terrible big ears Mulligan had. As big as cabbage-leaves and with as many stalks. When Mulligan got mad his two ears would stick out like an elephant's, and many's the time I've heard him trumpet, too.

Clancy edged me over to the grate, being careful to leave a clear line of aim for Mulligan. Mulligan could spit in the fire that fierce he never needed a poker.

"I was reading one of them magazines the other day—" started Clancy.

"Ah," I said, with the stout warming me up, "that'll be the *Undertakers' Annual*, no doubt?"

"No, it was one of them American books that tells you all the latest carrying-on. When you're in business y'know," he said, dabbing his great beak with a small tablecloth, "you have to keep up with everything."

"That's true," I said, taking a good swig.

"The latest idea is having a party—"

"A party?"

I would've choked, but I hate waste.

"Well, a sort of trade party. Y'see, when they want to sell things like... well, like the paint and powder for women, they have a little gathering with all the stuff spread out and a pot of coffee and the like."

"Ah," I said, "now I have you. Cosmetic parties and china-ware and that?"

"Right enough," said Clancy. "I put it to you now as a

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man of great intelligence, why in the world shouldn't I do the same thing?"

"You mean throw a few coffins around the place and have a bit of a sale?"

I thought he was joking, but not at all.

"Certainly," he said, "and why not?"

"A sort of earthen-wear party?" I suggested gently.

"You could call it that," said Clancy, who wouldn't see a joke if it jumped down his throat.

"And why not?" I asked, with nothing to lose. "It's a great idea you have there. Why, many a man could have a quiet look round at the different models and choose to his heart's content."

"And put a deposit on anything he liked," said Clancy craftily.

A sudden terrible thought struck me.

"Now listen, Clancy," I said, "I never felt better in me life so don't—"

"Not at all, Postie, I never thought of such a thing. Besides, you're well down my list. No, the truth of the matter is I'm getting a few leaflets printed, and I thought you could slip them round with the mail, y'know what I mean, casual-like so to speak."

So that was it. Free postage. I looked hard and severely at my glass. "That would be a chronic offence," I said.

He grabbed my arm. "Drink up that," he said quickly, "and have another. I know well how hard you work."

Mulligan poured the drinks with a look at Clancy that would have stiffened another man. "If it's all the same," he said to him, "you've no call in a pub with your working-clothes on. That hat alone is enough to take the head off a man's beer."

Had the tact of a bum-bailiff did Mulligan.

Believe you me there was no love lost between those two. And all over a little woman they both had their eye on. Mollie O'Shay was as sweet as an apple-dumpling and near enough the same shape. Nut-brown hair, rosy cheeks and eyes as bright as black buttons.

She'd been looking after her old father for many a year and Clancy called on her every week with the regularity of wash-day. Some said he was after burying the old man, and some said he was after marrying Mollie.

Myself, I thought he had a foot in both camps and I was right. When the old fella died, Clancy had him down six

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feet before you could say Dig. Then he started courting Mollie.

Mulligan, on the other hand, was never thought to be a marrying man. A strange, powerful character you couldn't read. He was chopped out of solid stone and moody with it. He'd been looking sideways at Mollie ever since he came back from sea and took over the pub.

True to her sex, Mollie was playing the two of them like a duet. One day she'd marvel at Mulligan's muscles, the next she'd crow over Clancy's cunning.

Anyway, I said I'd deliver the leaflets for Clancy.

He'd picked a day for the party when there was nothing doing and his old hearse was having a rest in the shed. Great old wagon that was too, only it wouldn't go more than eight miles an hour for anybody, dead or alive—I mind a time when the priest, being a jaunty young fellow, walked that fast he lost the dear departed altogether. Well, I was surprised at the turnout Clancy got, seeing that he offered nothing more than weak tea and oat-cakes.

Two dozen or more shuffled round his wee shop, trying to look as if they'd come in by mistake. There were coffins upright, coffins lying down and one or two standing on their heads.

There was pine and oak, silk and shrouds and a cash register the size of a tea-chest.

While Clancy was drifting round wheedling a few deposits, I watched the people. One or two, having sunk their tea and cakes, were trying to walk backwards out the door. Then I saw Mollie in one corner, smiling like a hostess with her bright eyes and round arms. In the other corner stood Mulligan, brooding like a bull. He must've realised that when his day came he'd have to have a box made special. He knew they'd never get his ears inside a standard model.

Then he let fly. "Clancy!" He bawled that loud two coffins fell over. "Clancy—you son of the devil! There ought to be a law against this!"

The whole room was struck dumb. Clancy pulled his hat down another inch and walked over to Mulligan as large as life.

"And what are you trying to do? Desecrate the spiritual air of me parlour?"

Mulligan's ears went out like sails.

"What am I trying to do? It's yourself that should be

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answering the same question. You're running a Christmas Club for death!"

"Mulligan," said Clancy, "you're a coward. And I'll tell you why. You're afraid of death. You're frightened to admit that we all have to go one day."

"And the sooner the better for some," said Mulligan. "But I'll tell you this: no man should be slobbering over coffins and the like while he's in the best of health. You won't get me running halfway to the grave, Clancy!"

"Mick Mulligan," said Clancy, "as big as you are I'll be alive to put you down, so don't be causing trouble for a man that's just earning his living."

"You bury me? You scrawny old vulture!" roared Mulligan. "You're a-dyin' on your feet!"

And may I never move again, the two of them made a wager there and then. The first one to go would leave his entire business and worldly wealth to the other. I never heard the like of it. In two minutes flat the whole crowd was having side bets and the place was more like a bookie's than an undertaker's.

I laughed all the way home, till I suddenly remembered Mollie. Now there was a dilemma for any woman—and what a pair of horns those two made.

If she backed the wrong horse she'd end up with nothing, but if she did the right thing she'd double her stakes.

Every man, woman and child in Downderry soon got to know the desperate state of things, and with spring fetching the old men out of doors we knew Mollie would have to make her choice pretty quick . . .

When she started going to the doctor's that near caused a riot.

One old biddy in the village said what everyone was thinking: "Meself," she said, chawing on her stinking old pipe, "I think little Mollie's not going to be so little come a few months."

She seemed right. Mollie began to look like a little round flower-bud, all ready to blossom with the help of a few weeks' sunshine. Nobody knew what to make of it and that's a fact, but there was high drama abroad, all right. The whole village was watching Mulligan and Clancy like hawks, but not a hint or a sign did either one of them give that he was the cause of it.

Mulligan kept pouring out, Clancy kept laying out, and Mollie kept growing out.

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I'd just finished the last of my deliveries one morning and was standing in Mulligan's bar, when Clancy came in.

Mulligan's ears flapped. "You'll get no drink here, Clancy," he said.

"I want no beer," said Clancy, just as sour. "I came to point out the shame of you—"

"Me?" Mulligan croaked. "Me? You coffin-carrying old toad! It's yourself that's traded on the feelin' of a poor lonely woman!"

"I never was no hypocrite," said Clancy. "Why can't you own up like a man that you had your wicked way with poor Mollie?"

"You must be mad," said Mulligan a lot quieter, "and if I thought you really meant that I would put me fist up your snout."

"Then what the devil's happening?"

"You mean you never—?"

"Not within arm's length—and God knows that's not near enough," said Clancy.

There was stone silence as the pair of them digested this. Mulligan's ears twitched as his poor brain got into bottom gear, and Clancy's great nose quivered like a pointer's.

"Mulligan," said Clancy, "there must be—"

"You're right there," agreed Mulligan, "but who?"

"If you ask me," I said, "I could well imagine just who it is."

"Ah," said Mulligan, tetchily, "for a glass of stout you'd imagine yourself a one-legged fiddler."

"I wouldn't say no," I said gratefully, "but I *could* make a bit of a guess who's at the bottom of all this."

"Tell me this an' tell me no more," said Clancy. "Is he in the village?"

"He is," I said, "and it would knock your eyes out if I told you."

"Give him another drink," said Clancy.

But I never got my drink. Just then the head and shoulders of Mollie herself came by the window.

"She'll never come in here," said Mulligan, though he said it half-frightened. He'd hardly shut his mouth when the door opened.

Mollie stood in the doorway and the sunlight dusted her cheeks and glowed red in her dark hair.

"Well?" she said, the way a policeman says it.

"Mollie!" said Clancy looking her in the eye, "you've

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brightened the day, but I'm ashamed of you—we're all ashamed of you."

"And just as I thought," said Mollie, calmly, with more music in her voice than a golden harp.

"I couldn't," mumbled Mulligan, "I—it's not in me to take on another's youngster."

Mollie just nodded. "And you, Tod Clancy?"

"Ah, now listen, Mollie, what d'you expect of a mortal man?"

Mollie nodded again. "Well now, I've got me answer, haven't I?" And she stepped into the bar.

Mulligan saw it first and his eyes popped near on to the counter. Mollie was her usual cuddling shape and no more. "In the name of—?"

"What's worrying *you*, Mick Mulligan?" asked Mollie, in a quiet voice that drew blood with every word. "Did you think because I wore an extra woolly or two that something was wrong? Did you now?"

Mulligan's face had more colours than a painter's palette. "Mollie! Dear Mollie—"

"And you, Tod Clancy? Did you count the number of times I went to the doctor's? Did you now? And me only going for a bottle of tonic."

"Ah Mollie, you've got it all wrong," sang Clancy, hopping from one foot to another. "I'd never give you up—"

"Shut up the pair of you!" Mollie's black eyes snapped in the sunlight. "I thought I'd find out the kindest one of you. Ah, anyone can be grand when things are grand. But get a man in a crisis and that's when you've got his worth. And the whole three of you wouldn't make a decent man!" She was gone, leaving just the faint smell of clean petticoats and eau-de-cologne. Well, that was that.

Neither of them got over it for months. Mulligan hit the barrel till he didn't know what day it was, and Clancy once or twice nearly threw himself into the nearest grave. Things got a little better when Mollie sold her cottage and moved to Dublin. Mulligan eased off to eighteen pints a day and Clancy started touting for business again.

Me? I enjoyed it all from the moment when Mollie stepped into the bar, but not before that. She may have given the other two a jab in their pride, but to tell you the truth, for those first two months she nearly frightened the life out of me.

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CAVERN OF FEAR

by GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

A new long thriller of a man on the run from strange and evil forces

I HAD never thought of the bungalow as lonely. It was separated from The Green Man by only thirty yards of straggling roses and lawn. On the other side was an abandoned yard, with the former stables and a half-roofless coach house. I was sitting up doing accounts in the kitchen. It was after twelve, and a man coming down from the hills would not have seen another lighted window for miles.

I don't think he knocked. He probably leaned on the back door and its latch at the same time, and both opened. His clothes were torn and he was plastered with dried mud. His hair was hanging over his eyes and matted with filth. Because it was fair and lank, it looked all the more dishevelled and pathetic, like the forelock of a grey horse which has pitched on its head in the mud and got to its feet, without dignity or sense of direction but still game.

About his eyes there was nothing at all pathetic. Within the tangle they reflected the light or, perhaps, projected it. As he rose, very wobbly, from the kitchen floor, I had the impression of a desperate string of muscles carrying about a brain which could no longer give a sensible order but wouldn't stop issuing them. He reminded me of a busy man with malaria. I shut the door

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and eased him into a chair. It was only then that I saw that skin as well as clothes had been ripped. He was oozing blood from long, shallow scratches; it was that rather than mud which matted his hair. He stretched out his arm on the kitchen table and rested his head on it. When he looked up at me from that angle his eyes were even more disturbing. I thought he muttered, "I want a woman."

A normal enough remark in private among friends. But as an explanation to a complete stranger of one's arrival it was a danger signal. My immediate reaction was to wonder if he would stay quiet while I went over to the pub to telephone a doctor or the police. Only a journey of thirty yards which was never taken. I often think of that.

When he repeated himself in a higher voice, it was clear that he had actually said, "I want my woman."

The "my" made a difference that any barman would recognise. If a customer said with his second whisky "I want a woman", you would give him a likely address and get rid of him. But if it was "I want my woman", you would prepare yourself to receive the matrimonial confidences which cartoonists insist are frequent; though in this country, owing to the licensing hours, a barman is seldom long enough alone with one customer.

"Who has taken her?" I asked, hoping that he would reveal enough of his trouble for me to decide what I ought to do.

"Nobody."

"How did you get here?"

"I don't know exactly."

"Are you sure she exists? As a person, I mean."

That was hurrying it a little; but one cannot be expected to have the patience of a psychiatrist. However, he gave to my remark a second or two of whatever he could manage in the way of connected thought.

"I think she must," he said. "If she did not, what would I have done it for?"

"Done what?"

"Run here. To you."

"But she is where you came from," I answered very positively, afraid that he might have convinced himself that she was, for example, in my bedroom. "I don't suppose anything has happened to her."

"Happened to her? Of course it hasn't! Not to her!" he exclaimed in a voice which was suddenly shrill and clear.

The upward jerk of his head disturbed his balance—his physical balance, I mean—and I just caught him as he toppled over.

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That eased for the moment the question of what I ought to do. Some elementary first-aid was urgent.

I brought him round with whisky and warm milk, which was all I had in the bungalow since I took my meals over at The Green Man. Then I helped him to undress, sponged and disinfected the scratches and put him in my bed with all the blankets I could find on top of him; a precaution, though he showed no sign of shock, only of exhaustion and some inner excitement. He was thin, but sinewy as a bird's leg. I remember noticing his very openwork undervest, a complicated cat's cradle of woven string. It suggested that he had bought it through the advertisement columns of some health magazine.

Once off the subject of his woman, my visitor showed no sign of aberration, thanking me with odd familiarity for my assistance and curling up like a child. Soon he dropped off to sleep.

Like a child, too, he had offered no further explanation of himself, handing over to me his exhaustion with complete trust that I would do something about it. I suppose that it was primarily this simplicity that made me feel so responsible for him. He was neither short of money nor suspiciously rich. He had a few pounds in a neat wallet. His name, marked on his clothes with such care that either he was a prim bachelor or had a fussy wife, was H. B. Fosworthy.

I hung up his tweed suit, turned out the bedroom light, and returned to the kitchen. There was no urgent need for me to make a nuisance of myself to hard-working police and ambulance men unless Fosworthy became violent. Ought I to send for a doctor? Well, there was nothing more a doctor could do for him beyond shoving a needle into him for luck. As an ex-mining engineer I know temporary exhaustion when I see it. There was no point in disturbing him until he woke up and started to demand breakfast.

I was about to unpack a Lilo and turn in on the kitchen floor when there was a confident knock on the back door. I said to myself that it was obviously the police, and opened up.

The man who entered was very English and apparently not a policeman. He had a manner which nicely combined courtesy with the assurance that everyone else was as reasonable as himself.

"I hope you will excuse me calling so late," he said, "but I saw your light on."

That meant of course that he had either come along the cart track behind the pub or down from the hills. It was a little odd.

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One would have expected him to follow the road and call with his enquiries at the front of The Green Man. So I pretended to misunderstand him.

"I'm afraid the pub has shut down for the night. And they haven't any rooms anyway. Just this bungalow."

"Oh, I didn't want a room. The fact is, I am looking for somebody."

"Man or woman?"

"A man. It's rather a sad case. He gets off by himself sometimes, and that leads to embarrassment."

Still playing for time and hoping to avoid direct questioning, I said that I had been led to believe that mental hospitals in these days could nearly always cure.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "But when it is just extreme eccentricity, one hesitates . . . You haven't seen him, then?"

"I thought I heard a noise in the stables some time back," I said, with the idea of protecting myself in case this were a genuine enquiry.

"Do you think anyone would mind if I had a look round?"

"Well, I don't. And everyone else is asleep."

"I'll do that, then," he said.

"Do you want any help?"

"No, don't bother! I've disturbed you enough already. Very many thanks!"

I saw the beam of a powerful electric torch thoroughly searching the deserted buildings. Curious to see where he went when he had finished, I slipped out of the bungalow's front door into the pub garden. From behind the hedge I watched him hesitate about calling on me again, then climb a gate and disappear across the fields.

It reinforced my guess that he had come that way. I wondered why he firmly refused help, why he was looking for his eccentric friend on foot instead of proceeding from village to village and police station to police station by car. If he had called first at the pub and then walked across the garden to the bungalow, with Gorm, I should at once and thankfully have handed over Mr. H. B. Fosworthy. As it was, I felt that morning would be soon enough for decision.

I had no friends or connections locally. Not many anywhere in England, if it came to that. My practical experience as a mining engineer was extensive, but my qualifications were not. So when I made a small killing in Canadian tin I decided to give up a profession in which I could never reach the top and start a new life in my own country. I intended to buy an inn and a

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garage. I'm a good mechanic myself and can spot in five minutes whether an employee knows his job. As for catering and comfort, I have lived for fifteen years in camps and hostels and can smell what a customer likes and what he doesn't.

That was what brought me to The Green Man. My agents told me it was on the market, and I was having a look at it. So, being a stranger, I had nowhere to go for advice and no judgment to rely on but my own. For the moment it seemed best to continue to lie low and say nothing. I locked all the doors and windows and went to sleep.

THERE wasn't a sound out of Fosworthy. About seven I looked in on him. He was wide awake.

He thanked me in precise language, but very warmly, and assured me that there was nothing wrong with him except that he was stiff.

"I'd better tell you at once that there was someone looking for you," I said. "A close relation, I think."

"Not a relation. Dear me, no! A former colleague would be approximately correct."

"He seemed to be sure you weren't far away."

"Yes. If my impetus had not carried me half-way over the wire, he would have caught me. He even got a hand on my shoe."

"What wire?" I asked, with some vague mental image of concentration camps or Berlin walls.

"Two fields up there. On the edge of the downs."

Then I knew what he was talking about, for I had noticed the formidable hedge and heard from Mrs. Gorm why it was there.

Opinions for and against field sports ran strong and very deep in that countryside. The farmer who owned the land between The Green Man and the western slopes of the Mendips bitterly objected to fox hunting. His boundary fence was a high, double hawthorn hedge, well trimmed and ditched, with a quite unnecessary barbed wire fence down the middle.

I could understand Fosworthy's condition on arrival. If his "impetus" had carried him into the hedge—presumably head first—he must have been in it for long minutes, trapped and writhing, while, apparently, a more cautious arm felt for him. And all this when he was exhausted after a cross-country run!

"You got through it then?" I asked, amazed that he wasn't still helplessly stuck.

"Yes. And then I saw your light and tried to run again."

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His follower had certainly never attempted the hedge, for his clothes were not torn. I supposed he had followed the boundary round to the road and had come down the cart track in search of the lighted window.

"Look here!" I said. "Shouldn't you be having treatment of some sort?"

"I don't think so. The scratches are all very shallow, and I never suffer from infections."

I gave up that line. In any case the innuendoes of the other man were probably lies. Fosworthy did not seem at all unbalanced in broad daylight.

"You're on the run? Some trouble with the police?"

"I'm a vegetarian," he said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Quite a lot. But it doesn't matter. I just mentioned the fact to show you that I do not take life if I can help it."

"I didn't mean I thought you were a murderer," I assured him. "I was just wondering about the Law or—well, politics."

"Nothing to do with either," he replied. "They both avoid essentials."

"For example?"

"Metaphysical animism. What is your religion?"

"Well, I put myself down on a form as Church of England."

"We are not considering the purely sectarian," he rebuked me. "You are a Christian then?"

"Naturally."

"It's not particularly natural. But it's a good start. I think I had better be going now."

Suppressing little yaps of pain, he hauled himself out of the bed and sat on the edge of it.

"Where to?"

"I have to see her again. Loving her as I do, she must be ready to love me. Then we could go far away."

"Hadn't you better tell me a little more?"

"She has blue veins."

"Don't we all?"

"Yes. But ours are not visible. Now, I am convinced—" he looked at me as if I were an intelligent schoolboy about to be enriched by an eager master—"I am convinced that when our bodies are ethereal, we may not distinguish the extremes of physical beauty."

I replied politely that no doubt he was right.

"What do *you* believe happens to you when you dissolve?" he asked.

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That was the first time I heard this word which was to become so detestable.

"Well, it's a bit difficult to know, isn't it?"

"Then, if that is what you feel," he replied with a sudden and disturbing return to everyday life, "you'd better get out of here. He'll borrow a dog and be back with it this morning. The dog will track me to your door and away. So long as this bungalow is locked up and I lay a trail, he will assume I hesitated at the door and went off again. That lets you out."

"All I've got so far," I said, "is that you are in fear of your life, and that you wouldn't care if you hadn't fallen in love with a girl with blue veins."

"Though crudely objective, that is about it," he admitted.

"But forgive me if I say it seems inadequate."

"Love and death? Inadequate?"

"I'll see about getting you some breakfast," I said, giving up.

"How about this?" he asked, turning back the sheets. "My word, what a mess!"

The linen was spotted by far more blood than could be explained by a shaving cut.

"Would you care to give me your hand?" he invited, apparently scratching his matted mess of hair in perplexity.

"Of course."

Quick and decisive as a surgeon he drew two scores from my wrist to my knuckles with a savage twig of hawthorn which he had extracted from his hair. I damned his eyes.

"It's for your own protection. Really it is," he said with mild surprise.

My exasperated opinion was that he had an obsession with blue veins. He had neatly nicked one of mine. I asked him how the devil he thought I could explain ripping myself twice in a tidy, modern room without so much as a rusty nail in the wall.

"You found a poor little pussy crawling around with a broken back, and when you tried to put it out of pain . . ."

"I don't put poor little pussies out of pain! I get someone else to do it."

"Then you are very muddled on the subject, like many other people."

But the excuse was good, blast him! When I went over to the pub for breakfast, I used the cat story—helping it, not putting it out of pain.

Mrs. Gorm believed in a good breakfast. I could hardly secrete fried eggs in my pocket, but bacon, sausages and a slice of ham were easy. Then, getting up from the table, I remembered

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that Fosworthy had said he was a vegetarian. That beat me. What did vegetarians have for breakfast? There seemed to be nothing but toast and marmalade which was safe. So I packed a pile of that in a paper napkin, and surreptitiously pulled half a dozen carrots and a cabbage on my way back through the garden.

When I went into the bedroom, I found that he had had a bath. He looked very different. He would have passed as, say, a devoted preparatory schoolmaster in his early forties if his clothes had not been in ribbons. He actually ate the raw carrots and much of the cabbage, neatly shredding them with a pocket knife. I watched him—stared would be a better word—while he performed his conjuring trick of making a cabbage disappear. I could not make him out at all. He had luminous, grey eyes in a thin face of yellowish tan. The hollow cheeks and remarkable eyes could look mild and intelligent, as now they did, or, under stress, crazily energetic.

"About your movements," I said. "I have finished my business here, and I needn't stay any longer. I'll drive you wherever you want to go."

He hesitated over this, and repeated that it was his duty to protect me. He pointed out that he still had to lay a trail for the dog.

"Damn the dog!" I exclaimed. "All we have to bother about is somebody sitting in comfort on the edge of the downs with a pair of field-glasses. If you really believe that is possible, we shall have trouble getting you into the car unobserved."

Since his coat was unwearable, I gave him a high-necked sweater of mine. I felt dubious whether he was in any real danger at all. Still, the fact remained that he had been sufficiently alarmed to dive through the solidest hedge in the county. Presumably Blue Veins' husband—as good a theory as another—did not believe in affinities and cabbage.

The odd thing was that the husband had not seemed in the least angry. Not out of breath. Perfect composure. Excellent manners. The compact body, the clothes, the close-clipped dark moustache, the ease and intimacy of address were those of a soldier or a local squire.

I paid my bill at The Green Man and drove off up the road, then turned into the cart track. I told Fosworthy to leave by the front door and work his way on hands and knees round the bungalow into the shelter of the little ornamental hedge. He could then reach the garden gate, which I would leave open, and crawl through it under cover of the car without anyone seeing him.

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It worked. I reversed very slowly with Fosworthy crawling alongside until trees covered us from any observer in the fields or on the downs. He got in and sat on the floor.

We had travelled a mile or two towards Cheddar when he started fussing again about that improbable dog. I gave way to him and drove back until we came to a bend where there was a field gate, just before the entrance to the cart track. This was very likely to be the point where the other fellow had hit the road, and he might well revisit it before going on to the bungalow. At any rate Fosworthy proposed to leave his scent there, and decided to have a roll on the grass verge. He then discovered that he had left his coat behind in the bungalow.

I told him to stay where he was, and not for God's sake to attract the attention of passing motorists by rolling on the ground as if he were having a fit. I drove back, recovered his coat, and chucked it into the boot of the car.

When I was approaching the junction with the road, my other visitor of the night appeared on the edge of the cart track and waved me down. He asked if I would be good enough to give him a lift.

"Have you found your friend?" I asked.

"No, it's quite hopeless. Where are you going now?"

Fosworthy was only just round the corner of the road, on the way to Cheddar; so I replied that I was going to Wells.

"That will do fine," he said, sitting down beside me.

I shot out of the cart track and made a thoroughly dangerous U-turn. For all I knew, Fosworthy might have been inspired to lay a trail by strolling after me.

"What have you done to your hand?" my companion asked.

He seemed to me a less sensitive type than Mrs. Gorm or myself, so I gave him the putting-out-of-pain story, saying that the noise in the stables had turned out to be an injured cat.

"I see," he said. "You should have apologised to it."

"I can't speak cat."

"Nor can I," he laughed. "But when you have to kill, if you calm yourself, you calm the animal. We are all the same."

There was something vaguely reminiscent of Fosworthy in that remark. Otherwise the man appeared pleasant and normal. He chatted easily, of farming on the Mendips, but did not tell me his name. I myself let him know that I was looking for a pub to buy, since that explained my innocent presence at the bungalow.

When we reached Wells he asked me to drop him at the police

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station. I was sufficiently interested to hang around out of sight and see what he did. As soon as he thought I had driven away, he came out of the station. He had had time to ask at the desk whether a pair of gloves had been found, but not for any serious enquiry.

I was back at the gate where I had left Fosworthy in twenty minutes altogether.

He had vanished. I was not as relieved to lose him as common sense insisted I should be. He had aroused a sort of paternal and exasperated affection.

DURING the next week I continued the search for my future inn. The Green Man would nearly do, but I was in no hurry. I wanted a Somerset village, not too low-lying, not too near Bristol and not on the coast. That more or less limited my search to the Mendips and the Quantocks, where I quickly got the feel of my surroundings and began to spot the same faces turning up on the roads or in the market towns. Once Fosworthy's friend or enemy passed me, driving a smart van designed for the transport of the odd horse or cow.

Some ten days after Fosworthy's disappearance I was staying at Taunton for the weekend. In the hotel lounge I got into conversation with a man of about my own age, evidently somewhat bored, and restoring his spirits by carefully timed measures of vodka. He was dryly amusing and very informative. He lived between Wells and Glastonbury and was a psychiatrist.

We decided to share a table at dinner. Dr. Dunton then suggested that he had a much better idea for my lonely evening than a movie, and asked me to come along as his guest to a big annual dance at the County Mental Hospital.

"You'll run into a lot of people who could be useful to a future hotel proprietor," he added. "There's no alcohol served, of course, but you can always slip out to the car park where some of us will be delighted to keep you cheerful."

It didn't seem too bad a prospect.

"By the way, do you know if they ever had a local patient called Fosworthy?" I asked.

"They didn't," he replied. "But I sometimes think they ought to have, if you mean our H. Barnabas Fosworthy. How did you run across him?"

His question sobered me up instantly. I wished I had never mentioned Fosworthy. He had been so insistent that it was vital for me not to be connected with him.

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"It was just that he wrote me a crazy letter about the origin of tin. What does he do?"

"Nothing. A bachelor, living on a reasonable income of his own. He's a funny fellow, much liked and much laughed at. When he first came here, he was always agitating against taking life. Then, very oddly, some of the sporting set began to consider him a sort of local prophet, though they didn't give up their fun. Our countryside is full of the intelligent half-educated."

"It should just about suit me then," I said.

"Oh, I didn't mean chaps from wide, open spaces! It's the effect of Glastonbury and the Mendips I'm talking about. Tumuli. Caves. The Holy Grail. Myth. Possibly climate."

We took a taxi over to the County Hospital. Inside, the hall was banked with flowers and gaily decorated. Dunton introduced me to a number of doctors and nurses. It was impossible to distinguish visitors from patients. I danced a bit, for there was an excellent band, and then visited the car park, where I was pressed to choose between Dunton's brandy, and champagne in a car belonging to a visiting psychiatrist from the Midlands.

I returned to the hall with Dunton, the Registrar and the prosperous headshrinker. While we stood watching the dancing, my eye was caught by the lovely slim figure of a girl in a gold and white evening frock who was dancing a waltz with abandoned grace. When her partner brought her round to us, I stared. She had a small head, with very definite but delicate features, set on a long neck. Her skin was paper-white and so transparent that every vein and capillary showed its course.

You could have posed her in a medical school to exhibit the blood supply.

"Is that a patient or a guest?" I asked.

"A guest," said the Registrar. "She lives somewhere near Bath, I believe. Do you want to meet her?"

"Not much. She scares me."

"Myself, I find Stilton cheese more attractive to eat than to look at," Dunton remarked.

"Oh, lord! Excuse me!" the Registrar exclaimed.

A harmless-looking, grey-haired chap had just barged his way on to the dance floor and dropped on his knees before her, babbling. She seemed accustomed to it, or else she was wonderfully tactful and sensitive by nature. She continued to smile at the poor devil without a trace of embarrassment until he was unobtrusively led away.

The Registrar returned to us.

"That hardly ever happens," he assured us. "After all, we do

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know who can and who can't be trusted. A charming patient, too! A harmless paranoiac who spends all his time working out the mathematics of a flat, circular universe."

Dunton's mind was still on the girl. He wondered whether she lacked a layer of epidermis or had little skin pigmentation. He said she would have to be damned careful to keep out of the sun.

"The sun!" exclaimed the Midlands psychiatrist. "What the devil has a woman like that to do with sun and beaches and vulgarity. God! Just think of her naked in candlelight!"

I was somewhat shocked. But I suspected that Fosworthy's one remaining thought when he arrived exhausted at the bungalow might have been much the same. There could not be two such women.

I was too uneasy to enjoy the rest of the party, for it struck me that where one of Fosworthy's perturbations was, the other might well turn up. In that case I could imagine Dunton introducing me and cheerfully mentioning before I could stop him that I knew Barnabas Fosworthy. My mysterious visitor with the moustache was the type one would be sure to meet at any social function of importance to the district. I was therefore very ready to go when the Midlands mind-healer offered us a lift back to the hotel.

At breakfast next morning I found Dunton just as pleasant with a headache as without one. He insisted that I should call on him if I were anywhere near his village in the evening or even if I wasn't. I promised to do so.

Before returning to London, I dropped in at The Green Man. Mr. Gorm said he had a telephone message for me which he had been hanging on to for a week in case I turned up. He hunted about for the slip of paper and found it among bottles behind the bar. It read: *If I sees Mr. Yarrow, would he be so very kind as to call on Mr. Smith at 34, Petunia Avenue, Ealing.*

I did not know a Mr. Smith who could conceivably want to see me. Was there a mistake in the name? No, the caller had asked for the gentleman who had been staying in the bungalow.

"So very kind as to"—that was Fosworthy all right. I was relieved to hear that he was all in one piece, though persuading himself that it was necessary to take refuge in the wilds of Ealing under an alias. I had felt guilty at having let him down through no fault of my own.

The following afternoon I drove out to Ealing. 34, Petunia Avenue was a small boarding-house. The proprietress answered the bell herself, and I asked for Mr. Smith.

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"Oh, we are so glad that somebody has called to see him," she cried. "He hardly ever goes out, you know, and we were getting a little worried about him."

I assured her that there was nothing to worry about, that when Mr. Smith was not in London he lived all alone in the country and perhaps had got set in his ways.

I knocked on his door. When he opened it, his face lit up with relief and gratitude. I cannot think of a time when anyone seemed so pleased to see me. He was no longer agitated. In fact he looked very quiet and miserable. He was thinner than ever, and his cheeks alarmingly hollow. I told him what had happened when I had gone back for his coat.

"I guessed something of the sort," he said, "and ventured to beg a lift from a passing truck which took me to Reading. From Reading I walked most of the way to Ealing, and took this room. Then my circumstances became almost desperate, as I had only enough money to pay for one week here. So I risked that telephone call. There was no-one else whom I could trust to help and advise me."

"But don't you have friends in London?" I asked.

"Very few. And they would not understand."

I could not see why he was short of cash. I explained, trying not to be patronising, that he could transfer money to an account in Ealing.

"I should have to give an address," he said, "and I cannot trust my bank manager not to reveal it."

"But if you really are in danger, why don't you go to the police?"

"It would involve so much. And I could not be a traitor. I could not."

This was utterly sincere; an essential part of his simplicity. I replied that if the person or persons from whom he was hiding thought he could be a traitor they were poor judges of character.

"I am bad at explaining. I get too emotional, you see. I can understand that they mistrust me and are very anxious to silence me. I am in love and cannot help it."

"How many times have you met this girl of yours?"

"Twice."

"And that's enough to convince you that you don't mind being silenced?" I asked.

"No, you have it all wrong, my dear Yarrow! An individual cannot be destroyed. Therefore dissolution is a mere inconvenience, though frightening if there is no preparation or apology. But since I have come to know perfection, the life of the flesh

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appears to me of greater value than I had suspected. I do not want at all to dissolve."

I returned to his practical problem, and offered a simple solution.

"You open an account in Ealing or where you wish. I guarantee the initial overdraft; then you write to the companies whose shares you hold, instructing them to send your dividend warrants to the bank."

"You would really do this for me?" he asked.

"Well, I don't mind. And meanwhile I'll pay your bill for the last week and calm down the landlady."

His private income, he told me, was around £2,000 a year. On that he kept up a comfortable cottage and a cook-housekeeper who came in every morning, served lunch, prepared dinner and cleared off home. He had written to her from Reading saying that he had been called away.

"When you fell into the bungalow that night, how long had you been on the run?" I asked.

"Not long. Since about eight o'clock."

"Since eight!" I exclaimed. "It isn't dark till nearly ten. You must have passed people and houses and you must have crossed roads, both of you running like hell. It isn't credible!"

"I cannot explain any more," he said very formally, possibly with a little bow he used. "I ask you to accept that, until after dark, we were in a place where there were no strangers."

"That reminds me. I still have your coat in the car. I'll fetch it before I forget."

The coat was not there.

I did not mention it to him; I just said that the coat must, after all, be in my flat. But I knew it wasn't. My misgivings returned. What about that dance where I had reasonably feared that the dark-moustached country gentleman might turn up? Possibly he had; and then it would have been easy for him to find out how Dunton and I had arrived and where we were staying the night. Then a quick examination of my car in the hotel garage.

It was clear that the man who had chased Fosworthy to my door now knew that I had taken him in. So it would be assumed that I had asked for explanations, taken an immediate interest in them and deliberately concealed his presence. Nobody would believe what actually happened.

A couple of days later I took Fosworthy along to the bank where I had fixed up the account. He looked very much better. I never knew a man recover so quickly from strain or worry. The

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next time I called to see him, he had gone, leaving no address. Not out of my life. I was sure of that.

I was uneasy about my connection with him and his affairs, but not at all alarmed. I attached no importance whatever to the secret I was not allowed to know. I suspected that it would turn out to be a Faery Flag made in Birmingham, for example, or a fake Roman bowl which he and his friends had decided was the Holy Grail.

SHORTLY afterwards my agents sent me particulars of an inn at Axbridge. One look at it from the outside was enough. So I had a free afternoon on my hands, with the weather set fine.

Lunching meditatively alone, I considered Fosworthy's possible movements. Suppose he had been on the run in the open from ten to twelve. Then the place he started from "where there were no strangers" could not be more than twelve miles from The Green Man. Half that was a more likely distance, for he must have been dodging about and changing direction according to the obstacles he came across. So his probable starting point was somewhere on the top of the Mendips above Westbury.

I drove through the Cheddar Gorge and then east across the plateau. It was sparsely inhabited country, but the roads were never far from each other and there was a fair sprinkling of traffic. Fosworthy could easily have found or summoned help in daylight.

For close exploration one needed to be on foot or on a horse. However, I drove idly back and forth across the likely area. Twice I saw a man on a big grey gelding at some distance from me. When I stopped at a cross-roads to study the inch Ordnance Map, he cantered up to me.

"Are you trying to find anyone in particular?" he asked.

I hesitated and very probably looked guilty. I ought to have come out boldly with the name of a farm.

"Not exactly," I replied. "I was just thinking that if three inns could make money tucked away up here, there might be room for a fourth."

"You wouldn't stand a hope of getting a building licence," he said.

"No, I'm sure I shouldn't. But it does no harm to speculate."

The word seemed to annoy him.

"You people don't care what you do to us all so long as you can make money."

I saw no point in arguing, so I nodded a good afternoon and cleared off. As I drove down into Wells, I remembered that Dr. Dunton lived only a couple of miles on, along the Glastonbury road, and decided to call on him. It was well after six, so he ought to be at home.

His eighteenth-century house was immaculate and satisfying

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in appearance. A generously built woman with splendid eyes was washing a dog on the front steps. Four ponies in various stages of undress were being attended by four girls between seven and thirteen. An older boy lay on an uncut lawn, listening to pops on a transistor set and detaching himself pointedly from the feminine obsession with animals.

Dunton was in a deck-chair, a tray of drinks and a book at his side, and he greeted me as if I were his next-door neighbour. After a drink and some casual conversation I asked, "Do you remember saying that this country was full of the intelligent half-educated?"

"I don't. But after dinner it's quite likely."

"Have you ever run across the idea of apologising to anything you kill before you kill it?"

"Now, just which of these coons have you been talking to?" he asked. "Aviston-Tresco?"

"Who's he?"

"Our most fashionable vet. And a damned good one."

"What does he look like?"

"Very much the country gentleman. Short, dark moustache, well-dressed, compact."

"Has he anything to do with the transparent woman?"

"Not so far as I know. But I tell you who is a close friend of his: that fellow Barnabas Fosworthy."

"Is there anyone among your vet's associates who farms on the top of the Mendips and rides a big grey gelding?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing. He was keeping me under observation this afternoon, and at last rode up to see what I was doing. I mentioned sites for pubs."

Dunton began to interrogate me in the pleasantest possible way. Where had I been looking for pubs, and since when?

"I'm going to be indiscreet," he said at last. "Is your pub-hunting cover for something else?"

"Good God, no! Why do you think so?"

"Because you have asked a number of connected questions."

"Just curiosity," I said, which was true enough so far as it went. "An innkeeper is like a priest. He wants to know all about the parish before he accepts the living."

"Neat!" he smiled. "But you're still not telling me quite all the truth. If you ever feel like it, remember that psychiatrists keep just as many secrets as landlords and priests."

This was too good a chance to miss. I told him that an impulsive act of mine seemed to have involved me with a bunch of believers in something odd.

"I've had a patient among them," he said, "and got some of it out of her. All life is one and interdependent. Death is a mere passing from one state of existence to another, but it may be momentarily inconvenient or painful. So, if you hand it out, you

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should express regret. That somehow creates unity with the victim, and wipes the slate clean.

"Well, such a creed is attractive to anyone who loves killing birds and beasts. It has some affinity to the regret and sorrow which big-game hunters tell us they feel when they have destroyed a very fine animal. I feel it myself when my daughters send for me to squash a large, very perceptive spider. The funny thing is that this belief is also a comfort to people who hate killing, like this Fosworthy who won't, and Aviston-Tresco who has to."

"You mean, that if one were shooting pheasants," I asked incredulously, "it would be just: Bang! Bang! Sorry! Sorry!?"

"I don't know that they would go so far as that," he laughed. "But it seems to me potentially dangerous to have no normal respect for death. So I wondered if you were not investigating officially."

I assured him again that I was not, and said, "So if one of these people fell crazily and romantically in love, it might show up this continuity stuff as a bit doubtful?"

"At any rate he would find it hard to accept death as a mere momentary inconvenience when it parted him from what he loved," Dunton answered.

That very simply explained Fosworthy for me, though not why his friends should have taken his back-sliding so hard.

The Duntons were going into Glastonbury to see a travelling circus and pressed me very warmly to join them; but I did not want to outstay my welcome. I shared their quick meal and drove over to The Green Man. I decided that I might as well stay there anyway instead of pointlessly dashing back to London.

About nine o'clock the man I had seen on the grey gelding came into the bar. He recognised me, handsomely asked me to forgive his rudeness in the afternoon and insisted on buying me a drink. He took a polite interest in my plans and asked me why I particularly wanted the Mendips. I told him that I wished to avoid both the coast and the conurbation of Bristol. Like Fosworthy, I was not good at explaining intuitive reasons, and from his point of view this statement, to me sensible, may have sounded inadequate.

"I think I can give you a good tip," he said. "If you call on the manager of the Somerset and Dorset Bank in Glastonbury tomorrow, he could put you in touch with someone who is thinking of selling. The inn is not on the market yet."

Soon afterwards he left. When the bar closed, I asked Gorm who he was.

"Mr. Alan Jedder," he replied. "Farms five hundred acres up top. You can see his place from the Twelve Barrows."

I had been nowhere near the Twelve Barrows when he rode up to me; but earlier in the afternoon I had been prying about

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among the tracks and earthworks of his country. So I was right in my guess. He had been keeping me under observation.

"Does he come here often?"

"Haven't seen 'im for donkey's years."

The bank he had mentioned was Fosworthy's. I doubted if the manager had any pub to offer me. The intention was to feel for my financial resources. If Fosworthy was not dead, he must have found somebody to lend him money.

When I had gone to bed, questions began to answer themselves. How had Jedder known where to find me? Well, he could have telephoned Aviston-Tresco who told him to try The Green Man on the off-chance that I might be there. Why was I under suspicion? Because Fosworthy could have shared his secret with me.

Till then I had done no thinking about the missing coat, content to be vaguely aware that there was something illogical about it. Of course! The answer struggled up into consciousness and competed with sleep. The coat ought not to have been taken away. In that case I should never have had reason to suspect that my connection with Fosworthy was known. Then why wasn't it left in the boot? Possible answer: because I could produce it in a court of law. If that was correct, Fosworthy had been in very real danger. As a corollary to that: whatever danger threatened him now threatened me.

In the morning I decided to go and see the manager and play it their way. It would be suspicious if I took no action on a hot tip from a knowledgeable acquaintance. Also I wanted to get to the bottom of the business. There was a smell of panic in all these hasty arrangements of theirs.

I allowed time for Jedder to telephone—though as likely as not he had got in touch with the manager overnight—and turned up at the bank at midday. I was shown into the manager's office at once. My first impression was of a wispy, pepper-and-salt man with prominent, watery-blue eyes, and in his early fifties.

With a wet cordiality he discoursed on hotel finance in general, and asked me if only the Mendips would do. It was the third time that this question or something like it had been put to me, and I answered more impatiently than usual.

"I have reason to believe that there will shortly be an executors' sale of a very profitable free house the other side of Bath," he said.

That was a long way from his district, so I asked him how he knew about the sale and how sure he was of it.

He was embarrassed and murmured a lot of nonsense, meant to be imposing, on the subject of the grape-vine between managers. When I pressed him for details of his profitable free house, I was surer than ever that it was a clumsy invention to find out whether I should be tempted or not. I fear I was deliberately cruel to him as he wriggled in his chair and fiddled with papers.

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Dropping his vague proposal as soon as he reasonably could, he told me that he knew of a pleasant, large cottage near Wookey which might soon be for sale and would make an excellent guest-house, if extended.

"It belongs to a Mr. H. B. Fosworthy," he said, his pale forehead beginning to glisten with sweat. "Perhaps you know him?"

"I do not," I replied, "but I remember the name."

And I told him how some complete stranger had called at night when I was staying at The Green Man, and asked me if I had seen him. He sounded like an escaped lunatic.

I thought that would fix him, and it did. I left the bank snorting at the incompetence of these anti-Fosworthians. It was only when I had driven half way back to London that I remembered that Aviston-Tresco had never asked for Fosworthy by name. I had given myself away.

THREE days passed, and I had more or less dismissed Fosworthy and his affairs from my mind, deciding that the precious secret was of no conceivable interest to anyone but a bunch of nuts. My best theory was that they had discovered uranium in the old Roman lead mines of the Mendips, that they were too unpractical, including the bank manager, to have the faintest notion what to do and that muddled pacifist convictions compelled them to keep it quiet. They were afraid of me as a mining engineer, not as a future innkeeper.

On the fourth evening I left my depressing furnished flat to go out and buy myself a lonely meal. While I was strolling to the bus stop, I came face to face with Aviston-Tresco. He hailed me very cordially as if I had been an old friend. The strange circumstances of our previous meetings naturally created a sort of intimacy. We did not, officially, know each other's names. He introduced himself, and so did I. I guessed of course that his appearance in my district was no accident, but I was in a mood to hear what he had to say.

"Would you care to come along to my club and have a drink?" he asked.

I accepted gladly. He told me that his van was parked in the next street, and we walked to it. I thought it odd that he did not use a car to come up to town, but supposed that he had bought some heavy article and was taking it home. He got in first and opened the near door. I sat down on a worn but comfortable bucket seat and was painfully pricked by a broken spring or a sliver of metal.

At my exclamation Aviston-Tresco turned round, looked me straight in the eyes with a most kindly expression, not at all the spontaneous consternation that one would expect, and said, "I am so sorry this had to happen."

Rightly or wrongly, memory instantly connected me to the

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emergency station. I leapt out of that van and ran round some corners, vanishing into a nearby public lavatory. It seemed very unlikely that a really damaging quantity of any drug could be injected by a casual, deep puncture, but a culture of God knows what nastiness could. Shutting the door behind me, I pulled out my pocket-knife and cut a gash two inches long and half an inch deep across the point of entry, which, since there was no mirror, I could only distinguish by feel.

A broken spring. No doubt there was one. And no doubt some other sharpness, now removed, had been ingeniously attached to it. I shot out of the lavatory, waved down a passing car and asked to be taken to the nearest doctor. The long-haired young fellow who was driving did not hesitate.

He noticed the stain spreading on my trouser leg. "Sit on that, cock!" he said, folding up a bit of waste. "We'll be there in five minutes."

He drove me fast into the shabbier part of Westbourne Grove, and rang a doctor's bell. As soon as the door opened, he cleared off discreetly with a cheerful wave.

The doctor was a youngish man and none too cordial. He was in the middle of his dinner.

"This is very urgent," I told him. "I want you to treat me as if I were in danger of anthrax or any other plague you can think of common to animals and men."

I told him what had happened, pulled down my pants, and showed him what I had done to myself.

"I ripped that open with a pocket-knife. That ought to prove to you that I believe the risk to be serious. I want deep disinfecting and whatever antibiotic you think I should have."

He had me face downwards on the operating table at once.

"I've heard of such things," he said. "Girls on the Underground and so forth. But the damage one can do without a syringe is pretty limited if dealt with immediately. And you did, and I'm going to. This will hurt."

He was right. And the slow injection he gave me afterwards felt like half a pint of liquid.

When I was reclining on side and elbow, very shaky but "comfortable", as they call it, he said, "I gather you think this was attempted murder. Shall I call the police for you?"

I gave it some consideration. Aviston-Tresco was a respectable, much esteemed professional man. As for the seat spring or nail or whatever it was, I had no doubt that it was still projecting but by now innocent of anything on its tip.

"I can't prove a thing," I said.

Having stitched up and plastered my backside, this now most friendly young doctor told me to come back for more injections the following day. That turned out to be impossible, and for some time I could only hope that his ministrations had done the trick.

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I had something to eat—standing up—took a taxi home and limped up the stairs to my flat. And there, sitting on the steps which led up to the next landing, was Barnabas Fosworthy peacefully reading a book.

He shut it, got up and almost embraced me. With his shy smile, always more effective in inspiring affection than confidence, he whispered mysteriously, "I have not been followed."

I made no comment on that. He wouldn't have known it if half Somerset had trailed him up the street. I let him in and locked the door.

"I fear you have done yourself a mischief," he said.

I replied that it was just a painful touch of sciatica, and asked where he had been since he vanished from Ealing.

"Bristol," he answered. "I came to impart to you that, though remaining in concealment, I have been able to press my suit. I knew you would be so delighted."

Incredible! I resisted the impulse to point out that the tweed he always wore would not hold a crease.

"It was received?"

"With courtesy and a charming reserve."

"Splendid!"

"But she wished to know whether my income would be enough for two. Alas, I am unable at the moment to supply her with a certified statement."

That was suspicious. It looked as if Blue Veins, like the bank manager, had been instructed to find out how Fosworthy was being financed. It could have been in the form of friendly advice, giving nothing away. I had the strong impression that she was not a member of the sect.

"Is she connected with all these former associates of yours?" I asked.

"Not directly. She has a female friend who is."

"So this friend of your Blue Veins is in touch with Aviston-Tresco?"

"You know his name?"

"Yes, of course I do," I answered impatiently. "I know everything except what the hell you have all been up to."

He had been very cautiously running in and out of Bath, hoping to waylay Blue Veins in the street. At last he succeeded. Twice she had tea with him. Once they had a morning together in the river meadows of the Avon. My guess is that she was intrigued by such a gentle curiosity, and said nothing about him till after the second or third meeting.

"I returned to London from Bath, where I said farewell to her. And I called on you last night, but you weren't in." It sounded like a child's reproach. "So I spent the day in my hotel and waited for dark."

Dark! He was hypnotised by words and conventions. As if he could not easily be followed in the bright street lighting of

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London! He probably turned up his collar and pulled his hat over his eyes, making himself more conspicuous still.

Obviously Fosworthy had been followed to my address, and there would no longer be any doubt that I had helped him.

"I see you are tired," he said, getting up.

"Where are you going?"

"To Petunia Avenue again."

I should have accompanied him, but by this time I felt unable to move anywhere but bed. I warned him that he really ought to assume that he might be followed, and recommended a few quick changes on the Underground, entering or leaving trains just as the doors were closing. That should do the trick. After all, he was being tailed by one or two complete amateurs, not by experienced police.

Next morning I felt much better and was able to hobble about more easily. About eleven I was called up by a woman. She had a pleasant but rather too decided voice.

"My name is Filk," she said. "Miss Filk. Dr. Dunton advised me to call on you to discuss a very personal matter. I wonder if you would lunch with me?"

I replied that I was unfortunately laid up with a touch of sciatica, that I had great admiration for Dr. Dunton and should be delighted if she would come round and have a drink.

There was nothing else I could do, short of saying that I refused to be interviewed except in the presence of police. And it was very possible that she did come from Dunton.

I thought it likely that she was coming to negotiate on behalf of Aviston-Tresco. In that case I had a chance to convince her that I did not know why my activities were alarming them, and that I was now more than ready to look for my inn in some other part of southern England.

I limped up to the flat roof of the building, from which one had an extensive view of the street. I had no intention of letting Aviston-Tresco into my flat. I spotted the probable Miss Filk when she was fifty yards away on the opposite pavement. She was dressed in a black town suit, smart but severe, and was leading a magnificent black Doberman.

I hopped fast down the stairs and was inside my front door before she rang. She was in her late thirties, taller than I had thought and decidedly masculine. She struck me as a woman of experience who could be trusted to talk pretty frankly.

I supplied her with sherry and cigarettes and admired the Doberman. She said that she bred them. When, between the dog and Dunton's many virtues, confidence had been established, I left a pause so that she could open up.

"A Mr. Fosworthy," she said, "has been making himself a nuisance to my ward."

"Miss Filk, I'm not going to pretend to you," I said. "I am

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sure you know the circumstances in which I met Mr. Fosworthy."

"He is quite mad, you know."

"He is certainly eccentric when he talks about your ward. Otherwise I find him—well, reliable for so quixotic a person."

"You believe what he has told you?"

"He hasn't told me anything except that he suddenly found his feeling for your ward getting in the way of his personal beliefs."

It was only then that I noticed an unsteady brilliance in her eyes.

"Then why have you financed him?"

"I haven't exactly financed him. I lent him money because he was obviously in trouble and I couldn't help liking him. I am very sorry that he can't keep away from your ward, but it was not my primary intention to make things easier for him."

"I am quite sure it was not."

She said this slowly and contemptuously, and I thought it was time to give her something which could be passed back.

"I'm a working mining engineer, Miss Filk," I assured her. "And I know the geology of the Mendips and what one can or can't expect to find there without being told by Mr. Fosworthy. Really you can leave him out of it."

As I see now, I could not have said anything worse. There was an awkward pause, so I leaned forward to scratch the ears of the magnificent dog. I have a faint recollection of raising my head in alarm. Probably the blow was already on its way downwards.

THE next thing I knew was that I was on the floor of a van, with a pillow under my head. I felt more drowsy than ill; so that I knew she could not have hit me hard enough to lay me out for more than a few minutes. I assume that Miss Filk had come provided with a syringe to keep me quiet. As a breeder of damned great, expensive Dobermans, she was probably quite accustomed to using it.

My wrists and ankles were firmly tied. On the other side of the van was Fosworthy. He had something soft stuffed into his mouth and held in place by a scarf tied behind his neck. He made a complicated, indignant gesture with his head, which I took as meaning that this was all an outrage and that he would declare my absolute innocence. Soon afterwards the van bumped along a field track, and we stopped, all lights off, on a concrete yard outside a farm building. Aviston-Tresco and Jedder got down from the front seats and opened up the van.

"I do not want to cause you unnecessary pain," Aviston-Tresco said to me, "but if you shout I shall gag you at once."

I said nothing. Anyway I doubted if there was a living soul within earshot. The south-west wind carried the softness of the

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Bristol Channel. Everything suggested that we were on the Mendips, probably on some desolate hill pasture of Jedder's farm.

The pair of them carried me in, and went back for Fosworthy. As soon as he, too, was safely inside the building, Jedder locked the door and switched on a light.

The place looked as if it had been fairly recently converted from an old stone barn. There were no windows. The double door through which we had come was new and fitted closely. There was a second door opposite. Against one wall were piled bales of hay. On a floor of rolled rubble were some old agricultural implements, an aluminium ladder, a rusty tractor, a discarded dynamo and bits and pieces from old days when horses had been used on the farm.

Yet the barn was plainly for more than shelter and storage, since there were two twelve-volt batteries to provide light, and an iron stove with a stack of wood alongside it.

Aviston-Tresco removed Fosworthy's gag, and the latter let loose his indignation.

"I protest against your treatment of my generous and kindly friend, which is intolerable," he declared. "The position in which he finds himself is entirely my fault."

"It is," said Aviston-Tresco.

"But I have told him nothing! I merely explained to him, as I have to you, that I consider a number of our basic tenets a lot of nonsense."

"You threatened us," Jedder reminded him.

"Certainly I threatened you. I said that if you refused to listen to me, I should make the whole thing public."

"And then you went straight to Yarrow."

"I had never seen him before in my life."

"Frankly, Barnabas, I don't know," Aviston-Tresco said. "But when you did talk to him you realised that what you knew would be worth a lot of money to a man looking for a hotel site."

That absolutely beat me, for I had been certain that they distrusted me as a former mining engineer. It was beyond imagination that Fosworthy could know anything of interest to the catering industry except a recipe for dandelion-leaf sauce.

"I have already given you my word," said Fosworthy in a tone which suggested that his word could not possibly be disbelieved, "that I have told him no more than I had to in order that he should understand my intellectual predicament."

"Then why did he lend you money?"

"Because I had to escape. I have a great deal to live for."

"I had no intention of killing you, only of restraining you until you came to your senses and we could decide what to do with you. And just look what your emotional idiocy has landed us in now!" Aviston-Tresco exclaimed. "Yarrow must dissolve and you too."

He sounded exasperated. That revealed to me more clearly

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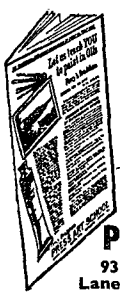

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than any of Dunton's or Fosworthy's attempts at explanation how sincerely these people believed that death was an unimportant incident. His tone did not belong to anything so serious as murder.

"What earthly chance do you think you have of getting away with it?" I asked from the floor. "You must have left enough clues for the stupidest of policemen!"

"They will not find any motive for your dissolution, Mr. Yarrow, or any body either."

I nearly said, What about the doctor? but kept my mouth shut because it seemed unfair to set these lunatics on him. For the same reason I did not mention Dunton.

"Again I tell you that I am very sorry," said Aviston-Tresco with a smile that was an obscenity in its charm and confidence.

"Again?" Jedder asked.

"He is doomed already. But we will not wait for it."

"When? Why?"

Aviston-Tresco was embarrassed and evidently did not know what to reply. It was an eye-opener that he had never told Jedder and Miss Filk of his first attempt on me.

The fact that I knew all about his Apology and had instantly escaped must have shaken him. He had panicked, cleared out as fast as he could, and improvised another plan for silencing me before some doctor removed me to hospital.

It did not look as if he had even examined my backside in the hurry of kidnapping me. If he had, he must have spotted that I had not cleaned and sewed up the wound myself. He evidently took the sciatica which Miss Filk must have reported as the beginning of the end.

"You'd better tell me the whole story," said Jedder.

They went through the door into the next room or compartment, and I could faintly hear their voices. At once Fosworthy rolled over on to his side and started to propel himself across the floor. He wriggled his back up against an old plough-share which was leaning against the wall and began to saw his wrists back and forth. I was terrified lest he should knock it over; but for once he must have had single-minded control of his clumsiness. Then he untied his feet and released me.

We were locked in and Jedder had pocketed the key of the outer door, so there was nothing for it but violence. I grabbed Aviston-Tresco's powerful electric torch, which he had obligingly left on a chair, and picked up a pitchfork with a broken handle. It was a frightening weapon, for the two prongs had rusted away to fine points. A man would have to have his anti-tetanus injections up to date after a poke in the belly with that one.

"I apprehend that you mean to take life," Fosworthy whispered.

"I shall duly apologise," I said.

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Fosworthy told me that there was another way out, earnestly explaining that his first duty must be to protect me.

"Do you think you can hold the door for a minute or two?" he said.

I very much doubted it. However, there was always the pitchfork.

Fosworthy started to lift bales of hay from the stack against the wall. With his height and long arms, he had just the build for the job, and he worked like a demon. In less than a minute he had made a considerable bay, with two bottom layers still to be removed. I had silently built a pile of three by two against the door when the main stack collapsed inwards with a whisper of thuds which was quite loud enough.

Aviston-Tresco and Jedder at once charged the door. My wall of hay was not much use. Meanwhile Fosworthy had cleared away the fallen bales and was heaving at the bottom row.

The door gradually opened. Aviston-Tresco got his right arm and shoulder through, and there was nothing for it but the pitchfork. It went in at his wrist, and the tine must have reached as far as the elbow.

His scream appalled me. I wouldn't have thought that such a noise could come from a man's throat.

I slammed the door shut. Fosworthy had cleared the floor, and opened a thick, wooden hatch set in rough brickwork. I saw him hang on to the rim of the shaft and drop. The hole was immediately flooded with light. I dashed across to it and let go into space.

Jedder, who was just behind me, did not attempt to follow. He slammed the hatch shut.

THE passage into which we had crashed was a gallery driven through earth and loose limestone, and shored in a very amateurish way. It extended for over twenty yards, lit by three naked bulbs, and ended at a steep, nearly vertical slope. Down this a flight of wooden stairs led to a small, irregular cavern, partly furnished with a table and a few chairs. Along the wall was a rack on which were hanging some sheepskin coats, fleece-lined. There was even a wash-basin, showing that this was a sort of cloakroom. In a horizontal cleft was a range of storage batteries for the light. Since they must have been charged from the surface, it was plain that the dynamo and tractor in the barn were not so unserviceable as they had been made to look.

"I trust this is all worth the trouble," Fosworthy said, breaking the silence. "If only you could see her!"

One could hardly imagine a remark less appropriate to the situation. But I had to take him as he was, so I answered that I had seen her.

"And now, would you mind telling me where we are?"

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"We are in the largest cavern of the Mendips," he said. "This is the secret."

"But why?"

He did not answer. They seemed to be as unaccountable as twelve-year-olds. All right, a private cave! So what?

"And how do we get out?"

"I fear I had to take a too sudden decision," Fosworthy replied. "Frankly, I do not know."

"You mean, we can't get out except by the way we came in?"

"It might turn out to be so."

"Then I think we had better fight our way out now, while only Jedder is up top."

"We cannot reach the hatch without a ladder."

So that was what the aluminium ladder in the barn was for.

"But in that case we are trapped."

The situation looked disastrous. If I had not been well used to the silence and drip of mines, I am sure I should have panicked. Even so I sounded shrill to myself as I put a vital question to Fosworthy. No, he said, the lights could not be turned off from the surface. The switch for the gallery lights was at the bottom of the shaft, and the rest were controlled from the cloakroom.

"If I have understood correctly," he said, "Aviston-Tresco believes you will dissolve down here long before starvation does the same for me. In that case, thinking that I must be alone and harmless, he may take steps to find me and put me out of pain. Perhaps you would tell me why he is so sure you are doomed?"

I told him. He tut-tutted.

"And I was convinced that I had protected you completely!" he exclaimed. "Bless me, you must be in some pain!"

I was indeed in some pain. Fortunately that young doctor had done a good job. His plaster was still in place, though blood had oozed over the top of it where a stitch had probably pulled out. My head was still sore from Miss Filk's blow, but I felt in fair condition. If there were any remains of the drug, violent fear and action had blown them out of my system.

I took down one of the sheepskin coats and put it on.

"Who made all this?" I asked.

"Jedder and one or two others. I helped."

Fosworthy showed me Jedder's tool store. It was well equipped with crowbars, picks and shovels, and plenty of electrical spare parts. I also found two coils of instantaneous fuse and a box of detonators. Unfortunately there were no explosives.

We took a pick and a crowbar with us. Fosworthy led the way along a lighted passage, sometimes opening out into considerable caves. Aviston-Tresco's torch, flashed into the clefts and dark holes along our path, showed that many of them dropped away into the heart of the hills. At one point the track sloped towards a terrifying abyss, but was wide enough for reasonable safety.

The place was a typical limestone cave. We had travelled, I

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reckon, something over six hundred yards when we came to the last of the lights. It was over the entrance to a low, wide cleft on the right. We then climbed a steep earth slope.

"This is the other way out," Fosworthy said, "but we blocked it. I am very concerned lest we may have done it too thoroughly."

So was I. A big boulder looked as if it could be persuaded to roll downhill, until I saw that it was held in position by smooth faces of concrete on which my pick rang and jarred.

"How far to the surface?" I asked.

"Seventeen and a half feet," Fosworthy replied precisely.

"What does the entrance look like from outside?"

"It cannot be seen. We spread earth over rubble and planted grass and an elder in it."

"Is there any other way out?"

"Jedder has never discovered one. But let us hope there is."

Hope! The only hope was up the shaft and through the hatch.

I worked away on the boulder with such tools as we had, but it would have taken a week to move it. The sides of the passage, weatherworn from exposure before the entrance was blocked, were more promising. Fosworthy took over from me and valiantly wielded a pick. We went on for hours, but it became plainer and plainer that all we were doing was to dig a tunnel under a roof of solid limestone. We should have died of starvation long before we got through.

We resumed our sheepskin coats and drank from a dark, icy pool where drips had collected. Then we walked wearily back along the passage. There was no way of reaching the hatch.

During a long rest to recover some strength we considered the only two courses open to us. We could wait in the cloakroom until Jedder and his friends opened the hatch, or we could explore the whole cave system at the risk of losing ourselves. I wanted to switch off the lights and wait; Fosworthy voted for exploration, and I gave way to him.

In the tool store Fosworthy found a couple of lanterns, clean and filled with paraffin. A second useful discovery was a compass, which at least would allow me the illusion that I was going somewhere. We had no string, but there was a drum of electric flex. We carried this between us on a crowbar through the middle, and set off.

Only one of the openings from the lighted passage offered a practicable route. It gave access to a more open system with magnificent stalactites like the ranged pipes of a cathedral organ. This was the time to start paying out flex.

We soon found that without ropes our movements were very limited. Fosworthy was eager to climb down funnels that were far too dangerous. But I wasn't permitting any such rashness; we had to go where we could, and accept the frequent compass readings which insisted that we had travelled round in a circle or

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a figure of eight. I still think that we were on a route to the surface which could have been managed by a properly equipped expedition. Fosworthy and I, however, were stopped by thirty feet of sheer rock. We turned back.

By the time we reached the lighted passage, my watch said that we had been searching for over six hours. We were in bad shape, Fosworthy limping and myself spitting blood from a wounded jaw and a lost tooth, the result of my head thumping against rock. There was no sign that anyone had opened the hatch.

Turning off the light to save the batteries, we slept.

WHEN we woke my watch read half past seven, but I was no longer certain whether we had been underground for thirty hours or forty-two.

"I have been considering my duty," Fosworthy said. "Since we must dissolve soon, nothing matters any more. Come with me!"

He led me to the horizontal cleft on the right of the path, by the last of the lights, stooped, entered and felt for a switch. Two soft floodlights at ground level and one powerful reflector overhead lit up the wearisome, eternal limestone. I could not imagine why so much trouble had been taken in a cave which was not at all remarkable, except for an overhang of smooth rock like the initial curve of a dome and another irregular slope at an angle of about sixty degrees to the floor.

Then I made out the mammoth, vividly drawn in a rust-red pigment, and I swear that my first impression was not of its physical form, but of its bearing, its mood. In spite of the spears stuck in flanks and belly, it was unaggressive. It was melancholy in the moment of death, almost trusting. It received. One could well imagine that it forgave.

I turned to the floodlit overhang covered with beasts. There were deer, bison and horses and some strange sitting creature with short, beseeching forepaws, which could have been, if the painter preserved his scale, a very large squirrel or some kind of sloth.

The paintings were covered by the thin glaze of the limestone walls which had preserved them like the glass over a picture. A better geologist than I, who knew how long it took to form a millimetre of the deposit, could probably date the pictures within a thousand years. They belonged to the same tradition as the art of Altamira, Lascaux, and the Pyrenean caves. Nor did this animal lover—hunter? Priest? Gourmet?—leave out human beings, though he drew them conventionally, with no attempt at the tender realism of the animals.

"Now you understand," Fosworthy said. "They believed that in my excitement I had told you."

I did understand. Buy your hotel, buy up any land available

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for the hot-dog stands, the motor coach parks and the souvenir shops; and when all that is safely in the bag, send a postcard to the British Museum!

This was a possession for the whole world. It would and ought to become a place of pilgrimage.

"It is not the paintings themselves," Fosworthy said. "It is their profound religious significance."

"So this is what started off your sect?"

"No," Fosworthy replied.

He explained that some years previously he, the bank manager, and a handful of other friends had formed a mild vegetarian circle which used to contemplate the Unity of Life and discuss how far their principles should be carried.

"Who found the cave?" I asked.

"Jedder. He's a keen rider to hounds, and was stopping a fox's earth, when he discovered the cave. One day, exploring alone, he found the paintings. He was immensely impressed. Who would not be? He invited Aviston-Tresco and myself to see them. We realised very soon that here was the synthesis we sought."

His explanation went on and on and I tried to take it in, while mind and eyes were daydreaming among the lovely simplicities of human life twenty-five thousand years ago. I could see how the mammoth might stir the imagination of our crowded world in which an animal is a pet or a potential carcase. The recognition between hunter and hunted of the divinity in each was lost to us.

Then the lights went out. I could not think for fear. After a few seconds they came on again. I thanked God, and tried to reconstruct causes, all unlikely, of a breakdown in so simple a system. They went out again, and stayed out.

"I told you Aviston-Tresco would look for me," Fosworthy said.

I hoped he was right. "Where will he look?" I asked.

"If I am not near the entrance, he will look here—where of course I should choose to wait."

"And what then?"

"I presume he will help me to dissolve peacefully. He seemed certain that I should be alone." I had forgotten the puncture from the car seat.

I felt my way out of the painted cave, pulling Fosworthy by the hand. We followed the lighting wires some little way and then turned into a labyrinth of ledges and pinnacles just off the track. I had passed it three times and knew it would give cover from any searching beam and from the passage lights.

First of all we heard Aviston-Tresco's voice.

"Barnabas! My poor Barnabas! Where are you?"

It boomed and trilled and echoed and died away, once returning with a faint, uncanny "Barnabas!" seconds later.

At last they passed the recess where we were. Jedder had a

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miner's lamp on his forehead and carried a twelve-bore gun. Aviston-Tresco had one arm in a sling and a lantern in his free hand. They were quite careless and confident. They went on into the painted cave; then they examined the blocked entrance, where they must have been impressed by Fosworthy's burrowings. Aviston-Tresco was still calling. The wailing of his voice through the black emptiness must have got on Fosworthy's nerves, for he jumped to his feet before I could stop him and shouted, "You can go to blazes, Tom! I'll get out of here yet!"

He really was the most contradictory man.

They came running back. I whispered to Fosworthy to lie still and shut up, reminding him of the gun under Jedder's arm.

"We had better have the lights on," Jedder said.

He had arranged a relay system for this. He walked round the next corner and yelled "Light!" Far away I heard the call repeated. The lights came on.

They did not attempt to look for Fosworthy. Wherever he was, half a dozen strides would take him into darkness. Aviston-Tresco wanted, I believe, to avoid that, and was genuinely anxious that his former friend should dissolve without the long agony of being lost.

"There will be a meeting to-night, Barnabas," he said in a voice which would have been inviting and calm if the sinister echoes had not repeated it.

They retired slowly towards the entrance. I suspected that Jedder was now by no means sure that Aviston-Tresco had dealt with me successfully. He liked to have space and plenty of light around him, and was continually turning round in case the unknown was following him. It was. We in fact got some distance before the lights went out.

Just in time we had passed the stretch of track with the foul drop on the right, and were now in one of the finest caverns, high and with plenty of openings. The only possible course was to settle down and stay exactly where we were till the time of the meeting.

While we waited Fosworthy gave me the rest of his story. The sect had been on the edge of the famous synthesis between those who hated killing, those who had to do it, and those who found it healthy and natural, when Jedder discovered the paintings. These were a revelation to them: there were those ancestors of ours, accepting that there was no difference between themselves and the animals, certain that the spirits of all continued to exist, yet killing to eat as steadily as any sabre-tooth tiger. So all of the group arrived at the madly logical conclusion that killing was immaterial, though, since it caused pain and inconvenience, it must be carried out with a request for forgiveness.

Then Fosworthy had fallen in love, and come to feel that dissolution was more than a momentary inconvenience. He had become excited, and threatened to make the controversy public,

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and the cave too. Eventually, thinking him out of his mind, they left him shut in the cave for twelve hours. When they came to see if he were ready to surrender, he escaped from them. Alarmed that he might report what they, prominent and respectable citizens, had done, still more when convinced that both their secret and their cruelty had come to the knowledge of a stranger who was only out to make money, at least two of them had decided that murder was the only solution.

WE slept for some hours, huddled together to keep ourselves warm, and were awakened by the lamps. In contrast, the darkness of the holes was absolute, and we had no trouble in finding one which offered several ways of retreat.

They came in a trailing group through the cave, following the lit passage. Aviston-Tresco was not with them. His exertions earlier in the day must have been too much for his lacerated forearm. The three or four men who led the way might have been sporting or horsy farmers, though they had not the tough, humorous face of the breed. They seemed to me to have a common quality of fierce, puritan self-discipline. I'd have trusted any of them where money was concerned, but run a mile from any contact with his private emotions. Then came the bank manager, accompanied by a mild friend of the Fosworthy type with a thin, fair beard.

Miss Filk followed, leading two of her splendid Dobermans. For the moment that was all of them, apart from the chap left in charge of the hatch and the switches.

And then, well behind the rest, came Jedder with that Blue Veins. The damned Stilton Cheese girl! I must admit she was exquisite if one could forget the transparency. In the white light, the blue tracery on the white skin was unmistakable. I think she had not been here before. The wonder and excitement in her face were genuine.

Suddenly Fosworthy rushed away from me, grotesque as some emaciated ape from the depths of the limestone, hobbling on one foot with his filthy sheepskin flying behind him. His Dulcinea received him with her usual immaculate sweetness. She had clearly been warned that this was likely to happen.

"You never told me you had joined us," he said. "I never knew."

"But you will come back with me?"

"It's quite all right, Barnabas," Jedder assured him.

He was in a daze of weakness, and, in the presence of Blue Veins, only capable of worship. I think that's the right word.

"I would like, if I may, to accompany you all," he said.

Plainly he had calculated that if all the party went on peacefully towards the painted cave the way was clear for me to reach the entrance.

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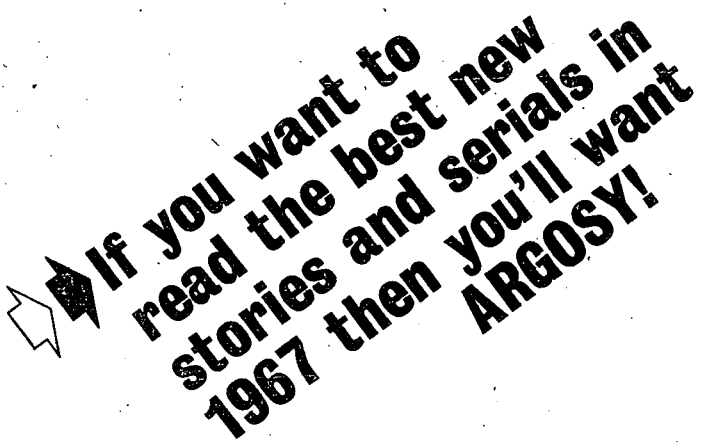

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Jedder, too, hesitated. The position was very tricky. All those people in the cave knew about Fosworthy; but the milder souls, though they might be appalled at the thought that he might impetuously publicise their secret, were quite incapable of murdering him.

Jedder let him go ahead with his enchantress. As soon as they had entered the passage which led out of the cavern, he followed quickly. I was just about to get clear of my hiding place when I saw him reach up and cut the wire which turned the corner. He at once rushed up the passage by the light of his torch. I heard the yell, of protest rather than terror, as Fosworthy went over the edge of the abyss, and Jedder shouting, "Oh, my God, he's slipped!"

There was nothing I could do. I shut my eyes and prayed that Fosworthy had been right, and that he had in fact dissolved into an existence sunlit, familiar and forgiving, not into the hell without certainties which he had left behind.

Blue Veins was sobbing with shock.

"He was walking just behind me," she kept on saying. "Just behind me to protect me from the drop."

"I tried to catch him as he slipped," Jedder insisted.

A voice remarked, "We have to leave him there. And it will avoid questions."

"I promise you all that only three of us know that he was ever found," Jedder said.

I could bear it no longer. I was light-headed with fatigue and hunger and sorrow. If I had not relieved myself by some expression, I should have charged out and run amok.

"You bloody bastard!" I yelled uncontrollably.

There was panic. Nobody but Jedder knew anything at all of my existence. The torch beams searched all over the sweating walls which disguised sound. I slid back unseen into the cleft behind me.

Jedder ordered them all back to the entrance at once, but Miss Filk stood her ground, let the two Dobermans off the leash, and sicked them on to me. I heard them patter over the rocks and into my bolt-hole; but by God's grace her flashlight, as she charged after her savage brutes, showed a loose rock.

I lifted it in both hands, like former inhabitants of the cave, and crashed it down on the head of the first dog as he sank his teeth into my shielding coat. The other ran away, howling.

Miss Filk caught the contagion of terror from her remaining dog. She was quite correct in thinking that I was close behind her. I badly needed her torch. I doubt if she even knew how she lost it. Her screams brought up some dim figures, who were furiously attacked by the Doberman. Her efforts to control it restored her normally firm character. I saw their lights disappear on the way to the entrance. It was impossible to get ahead of them. I was in no condition to challenge a determined Jedder.

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I lay there in the empty silence. How long I do not know. It must have been some hours, for I was very thirsty. I whimpered with self-pity and the pain of my bruises as I started for the entrance.

Then I noticed that Miss Filk's torch was beginning to fade and glow pink. I began a frantic search for paraffin by the light of matches which I knew were with the lanterns in the changing-room. At last I found a full five-gallon can under the steps, filled a lantern, and lit it. There were plenty of pit-props in the tool-store, so I built a fire on the spot.

My watch kept ticking, and I cut a notch on the changing-room table for every period of twelve hours. From then on I had an accurate record of the passing of time. One thing was certain: that nobody would return to the cave until positive that I was dead.

It must have been an obstinate desire to live which kept me going, for I do not think I have any exceptional strength of character. I ascribe my endurance without undue hysteria—a little was unavoidable—to being an engineer with experience of deep mines. I refused to spend my time just sitting. I had to give myself things to do.

I chose for my headquarters an alcove some way along the passage, but near enough for me to hear any sound from the entrance. I was afraid that my fire, always glowing but seldom built up unless shivering became intolerable, might use up too much oxygen.

It was a point of light as well as comfort. I never lit a lantern unless at work.

I found the break in the wiring and repaired it; but when I returned to the cloakroom to switch on, nothing happened. The batteries were dead. Before leaving, Jedder had short-circuited the lot. It was another sign of his determination to see me dead.

Trying to foresee the actual circumstances of my escape, I had to recognise that I should have more than Jedder and his twelve-bore to deal with, and that I could expect no mercy. I am sure that few of the sect would ever have agreed to removing me merely because of my knowledge of the cave; but now I was a witness to the death of Fosworthy and the attempted murder of myself by starvation, to which they were all accessories.

To escape was going to be desperately difficult if their routine was always to leave a man at the top of the shaft; and I decided that I ought to reckon on at least one more on guard in or about the changing-room while the rest hunted for me.

Against all this opposition I had to go up the staircase, along the narrow earth-cut gallery, up the aluminium ladder and through the hatch. One armed man could stop me anywhere. If he failed, his colleague in the barn had only to pull up the ladder, and there I was.

I saw that I had to create such confusion that everyone would

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be occupied sorting it out and the man on top would rush down to lend a hand.

I sawed one of the steps nearly through on the under side. Whoever stepped on it would crash down with his full weight on the hinder edge of the step below. On this edge I did some inlay work with the detonators from the tool-store; a dozen of them set close. I tried one out in a small cavity. A flat stone weighing about a pound, dropped from a height of two feet, set it off.

By now I was down to making soup of Doberman bones, and the end of the paraffin was in sight.

ON the ninth evening after Fosworthy's death I heard some dull sound which was not the last echo of a distant fall of rock. I went up the stairs, with considerable care, and into the dug gallery. Feet were trampling above as the hay bales were removed from the hatch.

I went into the tool-store and chose a crowbar. I was quite incapable of making any more plans. I simply stood, still trembling, in the passage outside the changing-room and put out my lantern.

I heard the aluminium ladder go through the hatch and down. A whole platoon of feet, as it seemed to me, scuffled over the rubble of the gallery, and the leader began to descend the stairs. There was an almighty crash as the sawn step gave way, but no explosion. The new arrival had somehow managed to miss the step below. He yelled, "God! I've broken my leg!"

The next man, who turned out to be Jedder, came running down to help and must have taken one flying stride over the gap left by the missing step. There was a flash which hurt my eyes, a report which sounded almost shrill, then a rumbling of echoes mixed up with the slither and thud of the falling body. I was terrified lest the whole staircase had gone, though I knew well that the effect of the detonators must be very local.

Someone else following behind—fortunately for him, not too closely—screamed, "His foot! His foot's off! Come!"

On hands and knees I felt my way round the cold corner of rock at the entrance to the changing-room and looked in. There was a dim group of three around Jedder and the man with the broken leg. A sixth person was at the top of the stairs asking if he could help. They told him to go back to the barn.

They could hardly be expected to think of anything but the unconscious Jedder bleeding to death. Every flashlight was directed at him. One gun, unreachable, was leaning against what was left of the stairs; a dark line, which could be another, was on the ground. I wriggled towards it and closed my hand on the smooth wood of a stock. Even if someone had looked up, I should have been in complete darkness to his eyes.

One of them heard me as I broke the gun open to see that it

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was loaded. I dare say he also heard the click of the safety catch. Two beams of light were concentrated on me. I told them to come out and stand with faces to the rock wall, hands raised. Having collected the dropped torches glimmering on the floor, I made them a very formal Apology, trusting that they would realise that I bore no malice. One of them fainted.

This was sheer, satisfying cruelty, for I knew I could not kill in cold blood and never intended to. While they waited for the shots, I collected the second gun and swarmed up the outer edge and rail of the stairway. I wasn't out of the wood yet, and I knew it. The fellow who had been ordered back to his post must surely have stopped to listen to what was going on. I arrived at the foot of the aluminium ladder just in time to see it disappear through the open hatch.

He did not put his head over the edge of the shaft. An unnecessary precaution. The man in control of that ladder was the last person on earth I would have shot.

"I will not let you out before the rest of them," he said.

I tried hard to appear reasonable, and told him that it was hardly likely that I would wait till the end.

I heard my cracked, unfamiliar voice warning him that if he did not drop the ladder I would go back and execute his friends one by one.

He was not impressed.

"Then I should close up the hatch and you would die with them," he said primly.

I recognised his style. He was that wretched bank manager. He was terrified, but it was still second nature to bargain with a client.

"If you don't let me out, Jedder will bleed to death."

That didn't seem to me much of an argument, but it made him hesitate.

"What are your minimum requirements?" he asked, as if not prepared to go far on such dubious security.

"You will drop the ladder and come down it."

"I will not, I will not!" he bleated. Naturally enough he was not going to risk being shut up for ever with his friends. "I shall go and fetch the police."

"Like hell you will! And stand trial for murder? But if you let me out I shall allow you to telephone for an ambulance."

"I cannot explain to them."

"If you all tell the same lie, you can. You will have time to shut up the cave."

There at last was something which influenced him.

"You swear you won't talk?"

"Word of honour! I don't want the police either."

The ladder came down far too readily. It had at last occurred to him that when my head came up to ground level I should be at his mercy. That had occurred to me long before; but he was a

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peaceable, white-collared citizen, and he would have to screw himself up to hit and would do it inefficiently. The game was to play on his nerves.

I climbed within two feet of the top and stopped to listen. He, too, was silent, which strongly suggested his intention. We had arrived at another impasse. He could not withdraw the ladder; but he could, if I tried him too hard, slam down the hatch.

Then someone came stumbling along the gallery shouting, "Don't let him out! Don't let him out!"

He was far too impulsive. If only he had known it, he had me. I could not shoot down the gallery from my position, and I had left the second gun on the ground.

The bank manager rushed for the hatch. He had to take a couple of strides to reach its free end, for he had been waiting for me on the edge opposite to the top of the ladder, where the back of my head would come into sight first. I raised the gun in one hand so that the barrels were just in the open and the butt against the wall of the shaft, and fired.

Naturally I missed him, but this was altogether too brutal a business for him. I shot out of the hatch, and there he was crouching in the hay.

I took him by the collar to the door, turned the key, which was in it, kicked his backside and told him to get that ambulance. I did not even pull up the ladder. I felt relief too overwhelming for any anger or revenge. The last of the late summer twilight was brilliant blue to me, intolerably welcome, full of joy and a future.

I trotted away downhill over springing turf on much the same route that Fosworthy must have taken when he was just a jump ahead of Aviston-Tresco. My night sight was of course marvellously good, and the absence of any moon made it sure that I could not be followed. They had enough to do anyway.

Somewhere above The Green Man and its hamlet I stopped, at last remembering what I must look like—with beard, scarred face, and clothes stiff with mud under a filthy sheepskin coat. The civilised world was closed to me for the moment. It would be surprising if police were not on the alert for any suspicious character after Jedder's companions had handed him over to the ambulance, and agreed upon some improbable story of accidentally stepping into a box of cartridges.

So I could not reach London as I was, nor did The Green Man offer any safety. Well-disposed though the Gorms were, I was not capable of inventing a story which would account for my appearance. The only possible friend to whom I could go was Dr. Dunton.

His house was only five miles away as the crow flies, and seven or eight by the roundabout route I chose in order to avoid villages and the outskirts of Wells. I decided to catch him when

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he left for his office. There was little cover in his garden. I lay up between the wall and a sparse shrubbery, close to the gate.

I slept till after dawn and remained still, closing my eyes against the sun which hurt them. Then the dog was let out. It raced barking towards me and cautiously retreated, pretending a mistake had been made. The milkman and the baker called. The girls went off to school. God, it was good to watch the simplicities! I heard Mrs. Dunton shout a last message to her husband, and his car came down the drive. He did not recognise me when I stopped him. I told him who I was, and asked if I might sit on the floor of the car until we came to some lane where we could talk.

"Things do come in threes," he said. "First Aviston-Tresco has to have his arm amputated. Then the milkman tells us that Alan Jedder died last night in a gun accident. And here are you!"

"Fosworthy, too, is dead," I told him. "Jedder murdered him. You said yourself it was a dangerous creed to have no respect for death."

"Just let me go back to the house and telephone!" he said.

"You aren't afraid of me, are you?"

"My dear man, I know no-one more sane or less likely to commit violence," he replied comfortingly. "I am going to telephone my office that I have a cold, and then I will drive you out of here."

He took me straight back to my London flat. On the way I kept dozing off and incoherently chattering my story. While I bathed and shaved, he went out to buy me something to eat, and then I was ready to answer questions.

He agreed with me that against the determined lying of a local group of highly respectable persons, I should find it hard to prove the murder of Fosworthy. Indeed defending counsel would suggest I killed him myself. As for Jedder, I was by no means certain that a judge and jury would consider an anti-personnel mine to be reasonable force.

"These people are going to commit themselves hopelessly to a story which the police must know is false," Dunton said. "It would not surprise me in the least if one of them breaks down and confesses in desperation that he killed Jedder himself. The police won't believe that either.

"Let them stew in it, and have your statement ready for when it is wanted. Just try to explain that it happened because you and his Blue Veins were too fascinated by poor Fosworthy to be unkind to him. That's something else which police will find it hard to believe."

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Part of this story forms the basis of a novel to be published next spring by Michael Joseph Ltd., under the title "The Courtesy of Death".

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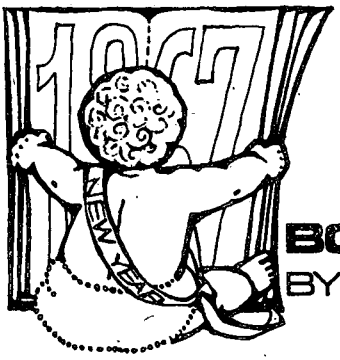

BOOK REVIEWS

BY CAROLINE HILLIER

THE end of the old year and the beginning of the new is the bleakest publishing season. Booksellers, half submerged by Christmas and its aftermath, are not likely to get out the welcome mat for new stock. It is not surprising then, that the brightest stars in the sky should be reissues of old books, that are at least partially assured of a good reception, with fewer fanfares needed all round.

☐ **THIRTIES REVISITED.** Among these sparse stars is one bright sulphurous comet—a reissue of Malcolm Muggeridge's *The Thirties* (Collins, 36s.), first published by Hamish Hamilton in 1940. I had a prejudice against Muggeridge, for abusing one of the most satisfying lines of poetry in the English language. Anyone who can mess about with Yeats like that * . . . But here there are no such sins. There is a new introduction, and this is written with even sharper thrust, greater clarity, less repetition, than the earlier work itself. The author describes how he wrote the final pages of his book in December 1939, clad in thick coms., in a barrack-hut among privates whom he later discovered were all practising or *manqué* writers themselves.

He describes the holocaust: "What I failed to realise was that Judgment Day had come and gone, unnoticed. When the holocaust belatedly occurred, it only fell upon what was already a wasteland"; and he also describes himself in the book: "I have always felt myself, perhaps to an abnormal degree, a stranger in a strange world . . . unable to take completely seriously, and therefore to believe in the validity or permanence of any form of authority. Crowns and mitres have seemed to be made of tinsel . . ."

**Muggeridge paraphrased a Yeats line in the title of his newest book,* Tread Softly For You Tread On My Jokes, *published in September 1966 by Collins, at 30s.*

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In this age of uncertainty, especially uncertainty as to one's own identity, it is easy to understand this, to nod in assent. The book itself is a development of the theme; here is no list of statesmen's earth-shattering ploys, of strategy, finance and *coups*, of kings and summits. Spread before us is the human folly of the Thirties, the human dilemma, more than a spattering of the truth. True, we have "Mr. High-Mind" Ramsay Macdonald ("the blind lead the blind because there are none who see"), and a farmer-like Baldwin, Snowden, Chamberlains galore, and a golden-boy-cum-Greek-god Eden.

Yet the overpowering impression is of something on a deeper level, revealed in the short, oratorical sentences. False sentimentality: postcards of Beverley Nichols' dog inscribed, "I just want him to be his own woolly self", and Godfrey Winn saying, "Look at that rose, old man. An hour ago it reminded me of a woman in full bloom . . ." False security, indifference: *The Times* writing in 1930, "Except for sundry disturbances which were confined to localities, such as civil war in Afghanistan . . . Jews and Arabs in Palestine . . . armed forces in China, the year 1929 was passed everywhere in tranquility . . .". A new type of romanticism and patriotism: *The Constant Nymph* and *Cavalcade*. A new type of healthiness: youth and beauty classes. The politicians' new hopeless hopefulness: conferences, conferences, conferences, committees to end all committees, terminating in dust and ashes. A different time from our own, but with how many echoes . . . "Sanctions in our time, Oh Lord."

Muggeridge is unsparing, of us, and of himself. He knows where truth lies. "One is driven back upon those other certainties, propounded in darkness but shining with their own bright inner light . . . to the deserts of vast eternity which lie beyond our shifting human history." Yes. Indeed. But after this brilliant sentence what is there further to be said, to be done, to be felt, to be lived, to be hoped, to be dreamed by men who are but men; and who can only reach or express truth in their aspirations or their art, their valliant folly?

"Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams."

☐ **UNEASY WARRIOR.** *Trial by Battle* by David Piper (Collins, 21s.), first published in 1959 under the author's pseudonym of Peter Towry, begins in time where Muggeridge leaves off. This is a war story, but not—be relieved or warned according to temperament—a high-colour guns and guts tale. This is a low-key, unusual novel, written by a writer who is obviously highly sensitive (this word I use as praise), and who has also

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managed to project a composite and compelling picture of one aspect of war, not at all lacking in power.

The hero, Alan, is a young man fresh from Cambridge, fresh from the arms of Lettice, his love, and from the chaperonage of her layers of winter woollies in the cold of Newnham passage. A far cry from the fashionable heats of today's novel, but perhaps a short cut to the core of it all the same, with one short paragraph such as: "'Al-*un*.' The way she spoke his name, the last syllable was perfect and final; it nailed his identity and established it like a butterfly within a showcase for eternity. With her voice alone she could so shape him, that the rider to the definition that later they would have to grope towards, with mouth on mouth, searching hands, body upon body, seemed always incomplete by comparison." Impressive, because although some of the words are romantic, he leaves it at that, gets on with other things, the story.

Alan's growing unease and sense of disorientation is pinpointed equally vividly by the way he counts his ten fingers in bed to reassure himself; by the end of the book there are eleven. His campaign is in Malaya, his constant sore and bludgeoning mentor an over-heroic, overblown soldier called Sam Holl, a character which does not entirely convince the reader, but makes a not too unsuccessful stab at being a portrayal of stubborn courage.

The book is also at times very funny, and the minor characters are well drawn. The total horror of war is palpably there: spectres lurking behind the rubber trees, a grenade bursting in a belly, the shooting down of the wounded, the quality of fear; and also, perhaps, and consciously, the chief danger of war: "Alan was, like everyone else, shocked by this series of catastrophes, but also in a way stiffened by the news; as though, the light having fused in his own room, he had opened the door to find the whole world was dark too; at least everyone was in the dark together." The book certainly does not have all the qualities—there are not here the signs of a born genius—but in its quiet way it is not at all bad either.

☐ **HEARTLESS HEROES.** With *The Harp That Once* by Patrick Hall (Heinemann, 21s.), we are in the present day, or so the author would have us believe. This is a first novel, and the author writes quite well, with a pleasingly crude and vivid style. Some of the story is told in the first person, some in the third, which makes no very great difference, but at least he's *trying*. It's the author's vision which worries me—if you can call "vision" this world seen through a pair of borrowed dark glasses.

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The hero, Marler, is Birmingham Irish. It's that story about rough, tough young man leaving home, marrying sexually competent but emotionally frigid wife (socially superior, natch.), while meanwhile he makes good in his high-powered office, behaving like a jungle beast as far as his fellow men are concerned, and towards women.

The scenes in Birmingham have a touch of authenticity, but one really cannot believe in this Marler, in his satisfaction at success ("Walking down to the lift, Marler felt impossibly strong. Invincible, independent, with a dead past and a green-bill future. He would never go back") any more than one can believe in any business of this Technicolor-type image ("But you know all our Sales Promotion plans for the coming year, Michael . . . You could take half the junior execs with you. They hero-worship you"). Nor can one believe in the diamond-sharp forty-year-old married woman trying, with surprising gaucherie, to seduce one of the senior execs; while at the same time controlling the entire machinery of the firm with her cool, cool, telephone voice. Life, thank goodness, isn't quite like this.

Is it like the world of Stan Barstow's *Ask Me Tomorrow*, now out in Penguin Books (4s. 6d.)? This is, of course, a boy-from-the-North-makes-good story of the classic type, but I had not read it before. I am inclined to think Barstow's standing must be a little overrated. He can turn an elegant sentence, with pleasantly flowing construction, but although his data is authentic, things are described often in terms such as: "Glynis came into the room brushing her hair which she had recently had cut short in the current fashion".

Moreover, the author is, to my mind, both a romantic and a puritan (*Lady Chatterley's Lover* is thus one of the hero's bibles), a combination which often goes together and which often, too, leads to a tone of earnest preaching (unless it has Lawrence's fire, of course). Maybe it is the hero, not Barstow, and I should like to know what the author feels about Wilf. I can't say I took to him. The sort of person who after two pints of beer gets very dogmatic about Life, so that you long to give him a double whisky to make him laugh. He theorises about everything (Frustrated Married Woman for example), gets free board and bed from poor old Poppy, scoffing her cocoa with younger and fairer females while she is upstairs ill in bed; which would be tolerable except that he is under the impression that he has a *mature* relationship with Poppy.

He is of course a writer, totally wrapped up in his novel, which gets as far as an agent, no farther (bless his innocent

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heart), and even when his new girl, who is herself rather a hard little bit, suggests that they make a night of it since they are to marry, he declines, not out of any consideration for her, since he subsequently plans to "have" her when he feels he needs her, but because it isn't the right moment. He explains this in a long paragraph made up mainly of "I want . . . I want . . . I want".

There is a certain *naïveté*, though, not in the hero, so much as in the whole attitude of the book, and if the innocence is unconscious this only enhances it. The preaching beer-drinker who can set the world to rights with words has that, at least, but if only the words tended to have wings . . .

☐ **OLD FAVOURITES.** P. G. Wodehouse's books, of course, make no attempt to be real life. Or do they? *Full Moon* (3s. 6d.) and *Uncle Dynamite* (4s. 6d.) are now also out in Penguin Books. There is, really, a great deal of human nature here, just as there is an extremely brilliant use of the English language in the melodious sentences. This is, however, escape-literature, and however funny the Earl of Emsworth can be, talking to his favourite sow in the moonlight, for me it is escape-literature that is best taken in small doses. There is sometimes too much of the tailcoated, top-hatted Thirties about the jokes, which although undeniably funny, can occasionally go on too long.

☐ **AMERICAN STYLE.** *The Spencer Problem* by E. W. Nash (Michael Joseph, 25s.), struck me at first as an up-to-date, American Pamela Frankau-type novel. In fact it is difficult to see what is or is not of lasting value in this book, which is to be the first of several about an imaginary American town called Portal. The writing tends to be over-lengthy and circuitous; and to have chapters told by different characters (including a dead husband), is a device which ties this novel down rather than liberates it.

Yet there is a very pleasing irony, a sharp grip of character, twentieth-century character with all its psychological tangles, real or imagined, in this story of a widow who cherishes the memory of her husband in total grief, although the marriage had been unhappy because he did not "communicate" with her. The twist at the end, when she finally breaks down the barriers, is that she is haunted by her regret at never having actually told *him* she loved him. I should imagine the picture of American small-city life, with its clubs, museum, golf, traditional business hierarchy, and disillusioned preacher struggling with over-fervent anti-segregationalists who defeat their own ends, is equally shrewd. The book is worth reading for this alone, even if the style leaves much to be desired.

Roll on spring . . .

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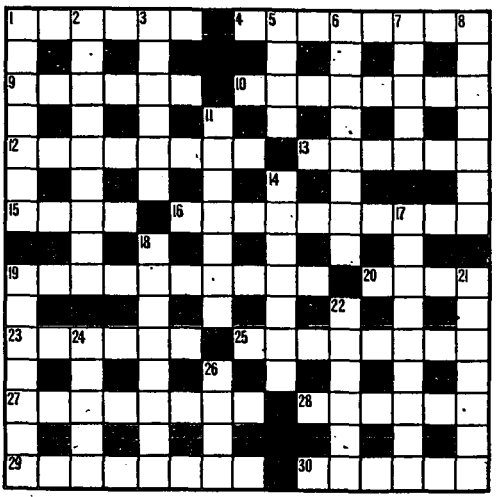
ARGOSY CROSSWORD

Solution next month



ACROSS

1 One who does another's dirty work? Beast! (6).

4 I'm decent, yet incorrect (8).

9 Bombards with husks? (6).

10 Counter-measure from creation (8).

12 Untie and perhaps flood (8).

13 Bivalve (6).

15 Same as ait (4).

16 To this one must take seven down (2, 4, 4).

19 A note case? (7, 3).

20 Stuff for examinations, maybe (4).

23 Stockings only entangled between the poles (6).

25 Line boxers take coming from their corners (8).

27 Feather in Yankee's cap? (8).

28 A rag? No, change to woollen fabric (6).

29 M in Morse . . . decode to show a terminological error (8).

30 Reared—at the poker table? (6).

DOWN

1 Flowering shrub (7).

2 Only too ready to believe (9).

3 Everything starts to make indirect reference (6).

5 That air of mine! (4).

6 Traveller has this to a map—about the route? (8).

7 Care and suffering (5).

8 Hair curl and hand jewellery allowed (7).

11 Walks along the short street first (7).

14 The Merchant of Venice (7).

17 A true antonym (9).

18 No race is involved in this film plan (8).

19 It's the least you can offer! (7).

21 You are out for a duck here! (7).

22 Business of the meeting sounds masculine or feminine (6).

24 The strings give a broken scale (5).

26 The lady has a point! (4).

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